

A romantic wedding couple is featured in the background. The groom, with a beard, wears a vibrant blue suit and embraces the bride from behind. The bride has long dark hair and wears a white lace-trimmed wedding dress, holding a large, lush bouquet of pink, purple, and white flowers. They are standing on a sandy beach with gentle waves and a blue sky in the background.

A DESTINATION
WEDDING ANTHOLOGY

A Bridal

PARTY TO REMEMBER

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A Bridal Party to Remember

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Contents

Prologue

Brielle & Lennox

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Fiona Davenport Books and Bio

Rhys & Emma

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Elle Christensen Books and Bio

Ruby & Austin

1. Austin

2. Ruby

3. Austin

4. Ruby

5. Austin

6. Ruby

7. Austin

8. [Ruby](#)
 9. [Austin](#)
 10. [Ruby](#)
- [Hope Ford Books and Bio](#)

[Miles & Sadie](#)

- [Chapter 1](#)
 - [Chapter 2](#)
 - [Chapter 3](#)
 - [Chapter 4](#)
 - [Chapter 5](#)
 - [Chapter 6](#)
 - [Chapter 7](#)
 - [Chapter 8](#)
 - [Chapter 9](#)
- [Hannah McBride Books and Bio](#)

[Rylee & Jase](#)

- [Chapter 1](#)
 - [Chapter 2](#)
 - [Chapter 3](#)
 - [Chapter 4](#)
 - [Chapter 5](#)
 - [Chapter 6](#)
 - [Chapter 7](#)
 - [Chapter 8](#)
 - [Chapter 9](#)
 - [Chapter 10](#)
 - [Epilogue](#)
- [Kaci Rose Books and Bio](#)

[Hunter & Skylar](#)

- [Chapter 1](#)
- [Chapter 2](#)
- [Chapter 3](#)
- [Chapter 4](#)
- [Chapter 5](#)
- [Chapter 6](#)
- [Chapter 7](#)
- [Chapter 8](#)
- [Chapter 9](#)
- [Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Bella Matthews Books and Bio](#)

[Lottie & Luke](#)

[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Frankie Love Books and Bio](#)

[Caleb & Vivien](#)

[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[C.M. Steele Books and Bio](#)

[Epilogue](#)

Prologue

AVERY/GABE

AVERY

Holy cow. I'm getting married!

I almost couldn't believe it. However, the sparkling diamond on my finger was the perfect reminder. That, and the sexy man sitting next to me on his private jet.

It had been a year since Gabriel brought me to The Sun Palace in the Florida Keys. What had started out as a business trip for the CEO and his assistant turned into a fairytale when he'd told me he loved me and proposed. We went home as an engaged couple.

I nearly melted when he suggested we be married at the same resort. It was so romantic, like a fairytale. And all of our closest friends and family would be there to celebrate with us.

I came home from my trip and told Brielle, my roommate, best friend, and co-worker, that I was engaged. She screamed so loud I was afraid the neighbors might call the cops for fear we were being murdered.

"He proposed?" she screeched, breaking into a weird happy dance that had me laughing as I dropped onto the couch.

"He wouldn't sleep with me until I had a ring on my finger," I admitted with an eye roll that was completely ruined by the dopey

grin on my face.

Brie snickered and sat down on the other side of the couch, pulling her feet up under her. "I bet you were grateful I threw all those naughty things into your suitcase," she said smugly. She'd been pushing me to give in to Gabe for months and when I arrived at the resort, I'd found nothing but slutty underwear, barely there bathing suits, and a few dresses that didn't cover much either. My annoyance only lasted as long as it took for me to see how they drove Gabe wild.

"I hate to tell you this, but he ripped up or threw out most of it."

"*Ripped up?*" she asked, her eyes wide.

My cheeks heated, and I ducked my head. "Yeah, he gets worked up when he's jealous. But for some reason, I find it incredibly hot." I peeked at Brielle and saw a dreamy expression on her face, so I finished with, "Maybe it's because of the unbelievable sex that follows it."

"Why aren't there more Gabe's in the world?" she sighed. "I can't imagine the phenomena of a man who falls hard and sweeps his woman off her feet will happen to both of us."

"Weddings are a great place to meet a man," I said with a cheeky grin. "Especially if you're the Maid of Honor."

Brie's jaw went slack for a moment, then she screamed again and jumped up from the sofa. She ran over and pulled me up for a giant hug.

"Um, Brie," I gasped, "that's a little tight."

She quickly dropped her arms and stepped back. "Oops."

"I'm assuming that's a yes?"

She clapped her hands and bounced on her toes, bobbing her head up and down. "Of course!"

It took an hour or so to get her to calm down and stop planning my bachelorette party long enough for me to call the rest of the girls I hoped would be my bridesmaids.

I called my cousin Rylee first, knowing she'd be the toughest sell. Rylee was an extremely gifted photographer, but she hated having her photo taken. She knew first hand how many pictures the bridal party had to be a part of.

"Hey, Avery."

"Hey! So, I have some news..."

"Did you finally convince that boss of yours to back off?"

I laughed because I'd spent a good amount of time complaining to my cousin about Gabe's pursuit of me until I realized I loved him and let him catch me. However, Rylee wasn't one to judge, especially since she'd been in love with her military pen pal for the last several years. This was a man she'd never met face to face.

"The opposite. We're engaged."

"Avery! I'm so excited for you! Now you have to tell me the details!"

I filled her in then asked the question I'd been hesitant to ask. "I was hoping you'd be the photographer."

"You didn't even have to ask," she replied, her tone filled with excitement.

"And a bridesmaid? Pleeeeeeeease?" I pleaded.

"But, I'll be taking pictures."

"Your assistant can do it during the ceremony. She did that wedding last month almost all on her own, right? Don't you love me?"

"Low blow, Av. But, yeah, I'll be in the wedding party."

"Yessssss! Love your face! I need to call the rest of the girls, but I'll talk to you soon."

She expressed the same sentiment and we hung up.

Next up was my childhood friend, Charlotte. We didn't speak as often as I would have liked, because we were both so busy. Lottie had the biggest heart I knew, but she had always struggled to make ends meet, often working extra hours. I didn't want her to stress about the added costs of the wedding, so I made a mental note to look for ways to cover her tab if she could join the wedding party.

"Lottie," I chirped when she picked up.

"Hey, you. How are things?"

I decided to just spit it out. "I'm engaged!"

"Oh my heart! This is incredible! I am so happy for you both!"

"Will you be a bridesmaid?" I asked hopefully.

"Of course! Would you also like me to make the cake? It can be my wedding gift to you both!"

I did a silent fist pump. I hadn't had to beg her to do double duty. Because I absolutely would have. She loves baking, and it has always been her passion. Plus, Lottie's cakes were amazing and her generosity was a blessing. "Yes, please! We would love it."

We spent a few more minutes on the phone—I filled her in on Gabe’s and my story, and she told me what was happening in her neck of the woods—before signing off.

My next call was to my friend Emmaline. She grew up in the Clover Springs with me, Ruby, and Lottie. We’d been incredibly close our whole lives, she was practically my sister.

“Avery!” she greeted when she picked up the phone. “You’re just in time to settle an argument between me and Miles.”

Miles was Emma’s twin brother and, to my shock, a very close friend of Gabe’s. Their older step-brother, Rhys, was Gabe’s business partner and the three of them were as close as brothers.

“Miles thinks I should quit my business in New York and move to Phoenix.” Emma was an elite, highly sought after wedding planner, while Miles had recently signed on with the Phoenix Dragons. I knew they hated living so far apart—a twin thing, perhaps—but neither of them were in a position to uproot their lives.

“Emmy won’t let Rhys look after her,” Miles said loudly in the background. “So she should move out where I can keep an eye on her.”

“Don’t call me that!” she snapped.

I chuckled. Emma was more than capable of handling herself. But even if she wasn’t, she and Rhys were complete opposites. They couldn’t spend more than a few minutes together without bickering and pissing each other off. Ruby, Brielle, and I all speculated that it was rooted in sexual chemistry.

“You both know how this argument is going to end. So stop wasting time on it. Besides, I have news.” I hesitated for a second, then added, “Em, can you go somewhere private? I have a feeling Miles is going to get his own call shortly.” I didn’t want to steal Gabe’s thunder when he called to ask Miles to be a groomsman.

I heard soft footsteps, then the snick of a door closing. “Okay, babe. What’s up?”

“It’s about the trip I took with Gabe”

“Did you go through with it?” she squealed.

I’d told Emma all about my plan to seduce my boss into a one-night stand while we were gone, so I doubted she would see my news coming.

"Sort of. We slept together"—Emma exclaimed again and I laughed before continuing—"but he proposed first."

Silence.

"Em?"

"Proposed? As in engaged to be married?" she sounded shocked.

"Yep. Next June."

"AVERY!" she screamed. "That's amazing! I'm so happy for you."

"Thanks, friiiiiiiiend." I drew out the word as if to remind her how close we were. Because I was about to ask her to pull double duty and it wouldn't be easy. Especially since Emma was a perfectionist and didn't do well with delegating. "Will you plan the wedding?"

"Yes! I would have been insulted if you asked anyone else."

I went for the goal. "And be a bridesmaid?"

Emma sighed. "That's a big ask, Avery. I don't think I can do both. I'd hate to slip up on one of the roles because my focus was split. As much as I would love to be a part of the bridal party, I'd rather make sure you have the wedding of your dreams."

"You're using logic against me," I muttered, making her chuckle.

"Alright, wedding planner and unofficial bridesmaid. Last offer."

"I'll take it!"

We made plans to talk the following week to get the ball rolling on the wedding.

I only had one more call to make, then I'd have to let Gabe know that I only had four bridesmaids. We'd planned on five and five. Well, I needed to call Ruby first, then I could confirm it was four.

Despite going to different colleges and life taking us far from each other, Ruby and I were still close friends. She was a junior accountant at a big firm in New York City, so she met up with Emma from time to time, and I saw both of them whenever I visited.

"Hi, Avery. What's up?"

Her cheerful greeting sounded forced and I frowned. "You tell me. Is everything okay?"

Ruby sighed. "Yeah, I'm just tired."

"Considering how hard you work, I'm not surprised." I didn't think her exhaustion was entirely physical, but she would talk to me about it when she was ready. And not a minute before. "I think you need a vacation."

"I'm sure you're right, Av, but that's easier said than done."

I grinned, even though she couldn't see me. "Hmmm... well, you're just going to have to make it happen next June."

"What's next June?"

"I'm getting married."

Ruby screamed into the phone and I had to pull it back from my ear or risk losing my hearing. I was laughing when I brought it back to my ear. "Avery, oh my God, congratulations! That's the best news I've heard all week."

"And just so we're clear, you have to be there because you're a bridesmaid," I said cheerily.

Ruby laughed. "You know I'll make it happen, Avery. Congratulations. I'm so happy for you."

"Thanks. Maybe it'll be your turn next," I teased.

Ruby scoffed.

"You know what they say...there's something about weddings..."

"I'm hanging up now."

I laughed as I set my phone down on the coffee table and relaxed into the couch. It would be so much fun to see all of my girls get their fairytale endings at my wedding.

I wonder if I can toss more than one bouquet...

"What has you giggling?" Gabe asked softly.

I raised my head, which had been resting on his shoulder, and grinned. "Just thinking about the bridal party. Do you think Cupid got his invitation?"

Gabe chuckled and kissed my forehead. "I think you're amazing and your hope for everyone to have a happily ever after is adorable. But, I think it's highly unlikely that all of our friends will be struck with an arrow of love in one week."

An idea came to me and I tapped my lips as I contemplated. I didn't know why, but I had a strong suspicion that love would be in the air at our wedding.

Gabe raised an eyebrow. "What is spinning in that pretty, devious little mind of yours?"

I grinned and lightly raked my nails down his chest, stopping just above his groin.

"Tease," he growled playfully.

Oh, he had no idea. "How about a bet?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"If every bridesmaid and groomsman finds love at our wedding, I get to choose any position I want for our first time on our wedding night."

Gabe's attention became laser focused on me, and his eyes narrowed. "And if I win?"

"You pick."

"Any position?"

"Yup," I replied, letting the P pop at the end.

"You have a deal, baby."

GABE

Avery looked smug and I kissed the little smirk off her lips. I loved that she was such a hopeless romantic. But if she expected any of my groomsmen to find love over the week of our wedding, she was going to be disappointed. I wasn't one hundred percent positive I would even be able to nail them down for the wedding.

I had no doubt I'd win our little bet. And the thought of my prize had me sweeping her into my arms and making a beeline to the bedroom.

"You had to pick that weekend?" Rhys, my best friend and business partner, grumbled. "You realize if I decide to run for Mayor, I'll be in the middle of campaigning. And we have the kick off for Mulligan Whiskey the weekend before?"

My eyes scanned the calendar I had pulled up on my computer and I winced. Yeah, I'd considered the launch for one of our

biggest clients. The weeks leading up to the wedding would be crazy with all the meetings and prep for the coming out party, but Avery had picked the date and I wasn't going to disappoint her.

"You'll just have to suck it up," I drawled, "because the best man is expected to be at the wedding."

"Best man, huh?"

"Yup."

Rhys chuckled. "I'll make it work. At least this means I get to plan the bachelor party."

If it hadn't been Rhys making that statement, I might have warned him off about strippers and a crazy party. But Rhys knew I wouldn't want that, and it wasn't his scene either.

However, there was one detail I felt he should be made aware of. I twirled my pen in my fingers, procrastinating... then sighed and dropped it onto my desktop. "Just a heads up. Emma is planning the wedding."

Emma was Rhys's younger step-sister, and I wasn't sure there'd been a time since they met when they'd gotten along. It had only worsened since they reached adulthood. Not that either of them would ever admit it, but I was convinced the constant clashing was to cover up their desire for each other. They were complete opposites, and too damn stubborn to realize they could make things work between them.

"I suppose I should have seen that coming." He sounded resigned.

"Miles and I aren't going to play referee," I said, referring to his younger brother—Emma's twin—who was also like a brother to me. "So, either act like an adult and fight the urge to bicker with her, or get your head out of your ass and make a move."

"Shut the fuck up," he growled.

"Denial," I responded.

"Asshole," he volleyed back. Then he chuckled. "Congratulations, Gabe. I'm happy for you both."

I grinned and leaned back in my chair, staring off into space, thinking about the woman I loved. "Thanks."

We hung up and I dialed the number for my brother's office. "Hunter Carter," he answered, his voice firm with an edge of impatience.

"That's a friendly greeting," I mocked, using a similar tone. "I think you need to work on your people skills, bro."

Hunter was a very successful sports agent—he represented Miles—who lived for his job.

My brother snorted. "Says the guy who's been biting everyone's head off because he hasn't manned up and told his assistant how he feels about her. You can give me shit about my people skills when you finally ask out Avery."

I swallowed a laugh and used a serious tone to say, "As much as I would love to take you up on that offer, I don't have time to bust your balls when I'm planning a wedding."

Hunter was silent for half a minute before he finally spoke. "Wedding? To...?"

"Avery, jackass. Who else?"

"You're getting married?" I could hear the smile in his voice.

"Next June."

"Well, holy shit brother. It's about damn time. Seriously though, congrats, man."

"I expect you to carve out time in your impossible schedule to be a groomsman."

"I'll do it on one condition," Hunter grunted.

"Negotiating with me about my wedding?" I laughed. "You need a vacation."

"You do realize Mom won't have to split her focus anymore, right? She's going to spend all her energy trying to find me a wife and convincing me to settle down."

"I know you're right, Hunter," I conceded sympathetically. "But I'm not sure what you expect me to do about it."

"Fuck," he sighed. "I don't know."

"At least she'll also be hounding Lennox about settling down."

Our mother's younger brother, Lennox, was only six years older than Hunter. She tended to treat him like one of her boys, which meant never ending grief about when he was going to find the right girl and trying to set him up as often as possible.

"True," he conceded. His defeated tone indicated he wasn't buying my bullshit. Mom would probably be doubling down on her efforts with those two.

"Do you think I could push her off on Caleb?"

Caleb was our cousin, an extremely talented marine biologist. We'd always been close and as it happened, he lived in Miami, so I was able to drag him away from his work to have dinner from time to time. He was also single, but...

"Like he doesn't get enough shit from Aunt Elise."

"Touché," Hunter agreed, sounding morose.

"Maybe if you brought a date?" I suggested. Then snickered. "One that you didn't have to pay by the hour."

"You think Mom would buy it if I brought Skylar with me? I could tell her we've been secretly seeing each other for a while now. I can probably get Sky to play along. Think you can help a brother out with Mom?"

"Sorry, brother. You're on your own with Mom. But if your ass isn't at my wedding, standing up beside me, I'm going to tell her you secretly love it when she sets you up on blind dates and that you told me you can hear your biological clock ticking."

"No need to get nasty, Gabe," he muttered, making me burst into laughter. He sighed and muttered, "You are a real shit sometimes, but you know I wouldn't miss it."

"Thanks. And I was totally bluffing about the blind date thing," I admitted with a grimace. "I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy."

Hunter chuckled. "Agreed."

My call waiting beeped, and I glanced at my phone to see Miles's number. "I've got to go, Hunter. I left a message for Miles and he's calling me back."

"Tell him I said to get off his ass and look at the contracts I sent over," Hunter grumbled.

"Talk later," I said with a chuckle.

I pressed the swap button on my phone, then put it on speakerphone and set it on my desk as I greeted my friend. "Well, if it isn't the football superstar," I teased, turning my chair to the view through the floor to ceiling windows in my office.

"Shut it, ass," Miles responded with a chuckle.

We shot the shit for a few minutes, catching up since we hadn't had a chance to talk for a few weeks.

"You'd think things would slow down in the off-season, but I swear, I'm as busy now as I am during the regular season, and Hunter keeps lining up new endorsements..." He sighed. "And I sound like an asshole complaining. Sorry, bro."

"You should probably take a vacation before training next year, maybe in June, to the Florida Keys."

"That's oddly specific," Miles mused with a curious tone.

"Well, I was hoping you'd take some time off to be one of my groomsmen and since the wedding is at The Sun Palace, I figured you could squeeze in some downtime."

"Dude, hell yes, I'm in." The smile in his voice was obvious. "I'm happy for you, man. If there's anything I can do to help, let me know."

"Emma is planning the wedding, so—"

Miles groaned. "You had to ask her? My sister is amazing, but she is also a royal pain in the ass when she's in work mode. You know she gets off on bossing people around, especially me and Rhys."

I chuckled. "You know how close she and Avery are. You can't possibly be surprised."

"I'm not," he agreed, sounding amused. "But I reserve the right to give her shit about it when she's driving me up the wall with her neurotic need for perfection."

"As long as you don't upset Avery," I replied with a shrug, even though he couldn't see the gesture.

Miles and Emma were incredibly close and couldn't be more proud of each other. They rarely argued, but from what Avery had told me about Emma while she was in work mode, I could imagine Miles getting exasperated with his sister.

Miles laughed. "You really are whipped, huh?"

"Yup." I swiveled to face my desk, put my hands behind my head, and kicked my feet up on the corner. "And no regrets whatsoever about it."

"I'm happy for you, Gabe. Give Avery a hug for me and tell her congratulations."

"Thanks, Miles. Let's catch up again soon. Oh, and Hunter says to get off your ass—"

Miles interrupted me. "Oh, for fuck's sake," he muttered with a scoff. "I'll talk to you later, man. Congrats again." Then he hung up.

I glance at the clock and decide to call my uncle Lennox. Hopefully, I'd catch him between meetings. Lennox owned the New York Nighthawks—a football team—as well as several other businesses. It was a busy time of year for him, but I knew he would

take my call, no matter what, so I hoped I wasn't interrupting something important. Besides, he'd kick my ass if he found out I'd waited to call him about my engagement.

"Gabe!" He greeted me heartily when he answered. "How did the 'business' trip go?" His tone was playful on the word business.

My pursuit of Avery hadn't been a secret, but only Rhys and Lennox had known about my plans to seduce her and propose while on a trip to the Keys. I'd planned a business meeting so that our reason for going wasn't a lie, but it had been short and at the beginning of our trip. After months of holding myself back, waiting for her to accept what she felt for me, I'd intended for Avery and I to spend the rest of the trip making up for lost time. And to make sure I gave her enough orgasms that she was completely addicted to me by the time we left. It seemed only fair since I was fucking obsessed with her, the love of my life.

"How do you feel about being a groomsman next June?"

"You tricked that girl into agreeing to marry you?" he crowed.

I rolled my eyes and tapped my fingers on my desk. "Pretty sure I convinced her by saying 'I love you,' and giving her a ring. But if that means I tricked her, I don't care, so long as she's mine."

Lennox laughed. "I'm happy for you kid. And I'm honored that you'd ask. I—fuck. Did you say June?"

"Avery wants to have the wedding on the anniversary of the day I proposed."

"Gabe, you know I would *never* miss your wedding. But shit, we'll be finalizing all the details after the draft and contracts for the existing team. I have construction work on the stadium wrapping up in May, as well as the official opening for the hotel I bought in Spain. Plus the merger with...Fucking hell, I can't guarantee I won't fly in the night before the wedding and out the next morning."

I'd known it was a long shot to get Lennox to commit to being in the bridal party. He was as married to his work as Hunter, and my cousin Caleb. And me—before I met Avery. Not that he didn't want to be a groomsman, but he wouldn't promise me something he wasn't sure he could deliver because he'd never let me down.

"I feel like a fucking asshole," he grunted.

"I completely understand, Lennox," I told him honestly. "I know how crazy your life is." The fact that he carved out time for me every time I was in town, or he was in Miami, said a lot about how much

he valued our close relationship. "I'm not the least offended or hurt that you aren't comfortable taking on the responsibility that comes with being in the bridal party. But, I had to ask."

"I promise your wedding present will make up for it," he said, his tone smug.

"I'd ask, but I know better than to try and weasel more information from you than you want to give."

Lennox laughed. "You always were a smart kid. Now, make sure you bring that girl of yours to New York soon."

"That's the other reason I called. Rhys and I have a big pitch in a few weeks and I'm coming out there. I'll bring Avery with me so she can see Emma and you two can meet."

"Fantastic. Just shoot my assistant an email with all the details and I'll make sure she knows to keep a night clear for you all."

"Thanks, Lennox. We'll see you soon."

He said goodbye and as the call ended, a text popped up on my screen. *Perfect timing.*

Caleb: Just got your text. Sorry I didn't reply earlier. Give me five minutes to get to my office and I'll call you.

Me: It's no problem. I knew you'd see my message the next time you poked your head out of your hole. Make sure you don't go outside while the sun is shining. You might burn.

Caleb: Fucking hilarious, coz. You want me to call or lose your number?

Me: I'll just keep calling...

My phone vibrated and Caleb's face appeared on the screen.

"What?" he barked.

"Hey there, Caleb," I said breezily. "What's up?"

Caleb practically growled, "I'm busy. Is there a point to this call?"

"You've been AWOL for over three weeks, man. I'm making sure you haven't turned into a vampire."

Caleb had a doctorate in Marine Biology and was the head of his own program in the Miami area. He was constantly working overtime to study and preserve the marine ecosystem along the Florida coast, so he was busy as hell and forgot everything that didn't live in the ocean.

"You said it was important," Caleb reminded me, pointedly ignoring my ribbing.

I sighed. "You used to be more fun."

"Hey, I can still be fun," he argued. "I'm just a little out of practice."

"I'm glad to hear that. You might want to start polishing those skills because I can't have one of my groomsmen at my wedding scaring all the guests with his grumpy, anti-social ass."

Caleb's shock was audible. "Are you shitting me? You're getting married and you want me as one of your penguins?"

I laughed. "So what's it going to be?"

"Of course. I'm happy for you, Gabe," he grumbled. "But fuck my life, my mom is going to be relentless now."

"Yeah, Hunter basically said the same thing."

"One bites the dust and suddenly, our mom's see light at the end of the tunnel for the rest of us."

I tried not to smile, fighting to keep my amusement out of my voice. "I'd say I'm sorry, but..."

"Yeah, I can hear how bad you feel about it," Caleb snarked.

"There's one sure-fire way to get your mom off your back," I offered. "Get a woman of your own."

Caleb snorted. "If that was your way of trying to be helpful, you suck at it."

I scratched my chin and thought about Avery's matchmaking hopes. "You never know, maybe you'll meet someone at the wedding."

"Gabe, I'm honored to be in your bridal party, and I'm truly happy you've found Avery, but you've lost your fucking mind if you think a woman is going to make my life less complicated. And even if that were true, I don't have the time or patience to find one."

"That's what I thought," I rebutted. "Just saying."

Caleb chuckled. "I'll keep that in mind. Send me all the details and I'll make sure to write it down in my calendar."

I made a mental note to find out if he had an assistant, or someone who would make sure the date of the wedding was not only added to his calendar, but had several reminders set to go off. While not on purpose, my cousin had a habit of disappearing into his work and forgetting the rest of the world existed. But he was one of my best friends, and I hated the idea of him missing my wedding.

GABE

I curled my arm around Avery and nuzzled my face in her neck as I pulled her into my side. We were on the couch in my apartment watching a movie. Or more accurately, a movie was playing on the TV while we made out on the sofa.

"Did you manage to get through to everyone?" she asked, tilting her head to give me better access to the sensitive skin under her ear.

"I did. But, as I suspected, Lennox declined being in the bridal party. He'd never miss our wedding, but unless he has some major projects wrap up early, we'll be lucky to get him for the rehearsal and ceremony."

"I bet he was disappointed," she mumbled.

"Mmmhmmm. But on the bright side, the bridal party is even at four and four."

"True. And all of them single." She sounded a little too excited about that so I nipped her ear lobe with my teeth.

"Focus on our happily ever after and leave Cupid to the others."

"You're adorable," she giggled.

My brow rose to my hairline. "Adorable?" I growled. "I am not adorable."

Before she could respond, she was flat on her back with my body covering hers from head to toe. My mouth devoured hers until she was panting and writhing beneath me. When I ripped my lips from hers, I rasped, "Still think I'm adorable?"

Avery shook her head. "Sexy. Hot as sin. A God in the bedroom. Take your pick."

I brushed a kiss over her nose, then rested my forehead against hers. "How about, I'm yours?"

Her beautiful face turned soft and dreamy. "And I'm yours."

After giving her a soft, slow kiss, I whispered, "I can't wait to marry you."

Brielle & Lennox

FIONA DAVENPORT

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Chapter One

LENNOX

“LENNOX.”

I turned at my nephew’s voice, and a grin spread across my face. Gabriel was my sister’s son, but I’d been quite the shock to my parents, so we were only eight years apart. We’d always been close. He even lived with me in Manhattan the summer before he started college. During his time in school, he and Rhys—his best friend and eventual business partner—often crashed at my penthouse. When they decided to open a division of their company in New York, Rhys stayed in one of my guest rooms until he found his own place. Their company also handled the advertising for my football team, the New York Nighthawks.

Gabe strode toward me with a giant smile and his arm draped around his fiancée, Avery. She waved cheerily before running over to give me a big bear hug. “Hey, sweetheart. How’s the kid treating you? Do I need to kick his ass?”

Avery giggled, then outright laughed when she found herself hauled backward against Gabe’s chest while he scowled at me. I bit back my own amusement, knowing he wouldn’t appreciate it. He reminded me of my friend, Justice Kendall, who handled my investments. He bit the head off anyone who looked at his wife in a way he didn’t like. Sometimes, I was surprised he hadn’t ended up in jail for killing someone who dared to touch Blair.

From my interactions with Gabe and Avery, I could see he was just as obsessed with his woman, and Avery clearly loved him with the same passion. I couldn’t be any happier for them.

"Gabe," I greeted my nephew, giving him a back-slapping hug. "Congratulations. I'm so damn proud of you."

"Thanks for coming, Lennox."

"Wouldn't have missed it." I gestured to the check-in desk and picked up the suitcase I'd dropped in order to hug Avery. "I'm going to get checked in. Hunter mentioned he would be here today." Gabe's older brother was a sports agent and represented a few of my players, so we spoke frequently. "And he brought a date?" This was shocking to everyone because he was married to his job. Not that I had any room to judge.

"Yup," Gabe confirmed, then he chuckled and added, "You just might be off the hook with Mom this week. She'll be too busy fixating on Hunter and his date to badger you about settling down."

I winced. "Are your parents here yet?"

Gabe nodded. "They arrived yesterday. Dad took Mom out on an excursion and told me not to expect them back for a couple of days."

I smiled, relieved I would have some time before my sister—who I loved but drove me crazy—descended and started pestering me about being single. "Great, I can relax for a while then."

Avery giggled since she'd seen for herself how Amy treated me as if I were another of her sons. "Maybe you'll meet someone while you're here, and she'll stop badgering you to get married." Before I could respond, her eyes darted behind me. "Oh! I see my maid of honor," Avery announced with a bright smile. "I need to talk to her about the reservation for the spa on Wednesday. Be right back!" She went up on her tiptoes and kissed Gabe's cheek before blowing me a kiss and running out toward the pool.

Gabe stared after her like he couldn't bear for her to be out of his sight, and I just shook my head as I approached the front desk. I couldn't imagine ever meeting a woman who would have me that wrapped around her finger. Still single at forty years old, I doubted I'd ever find a woman who would make me want to settle down at all.

"Go on," I told him, smirking. "I know you want to follow her. I'm just going to drop my stuff in my suite and head out to the pool." He shot me a grateful smile before stalking in the same direction his bride had gone.

Right before he went outside, he turned and called out, "Have dinner with Avery and me tonight."

"Sure," I answered. He gave me a chin lift in acknowledgment, then disappeared outside.

Key in hand, I made my way to my room and unpacked, then called housekeeping to come take my custom-tailored Armani suit to be pressed for the wedding. I changed into trunks and a pair of deck shoes, stuck a pair of Bvlgari sunglasses on my nose, and grabbed a shirt and towel to take with me.

As busy as my football team and other business ventures kept me, I hadn't taken a vacation in years. I was looking forward to some downtime.

The air was sticky and hot, pretty much the norm for a June day in Florida, which meant the pool area was packed. It only took one quick glance around to know there were no open loungers.

There were private cabanas, and I probably could have had one cleared out for me for the right price. However, that wasn't my style. I enjoyed the comforts of being a billionaire, but I wasn't an asshole. At least not outside the boardroom.

Figuring something would open up eventually, I headed to the bar and ordered a scotch on the rocks with a twist. When my drink arrived, I wandered toward the beach, wondering if I'd find a place to chill.

Right before I reached the steps that would take me down into the sand, I spied an open chair to my right. I turned toward it, intent on getting there before someone else spotted it. But when my gaze strayed to the lounge next to it, I froze.

After a few moments, I double blinked to make sure the vision in front of me was real. When it didn't disappear, the breath caught in my lungs whooshed out.

A woman was lying on the sun chair, her body relaxed and glistening with a light sheen of perspiration. The way it probably looked after a bout of hot, sweaty sex. She had an hourglass figure worthy of a 1950s pinup. With full breasts and round hips, her body was made for breeding. Soft curls of white-blond hair that ended just above her shoulders were held back from her classically beautiful features by a gold headband that matched her swimsuit. If you could call what she was wearing that. The scraps of fabric could barely be classified as a bikini.

The suit was sexy as fuck, but that thing was going in the trash ASAP. Her curves belonged to me. She was mine, and only mine.

Mine? What the fuck?

She couldn't be. She was clearly much, much too young for me. She...

Well, shit. Gabe had been right.

The second I saw her, she became mine. I was already feeling the obsession and surges of possessiveness coursed through my body.

Her blissful expression made me wonder how she'd look when she was coming down from the high of an orgasm. The thought had my cock hardening in my trunks, so I shifted my towel in front of me.

I noticed someone approaching in my peripheral vision, and my head swung in their direction. My expression made it clear that going near my woman meant putting their life in my tightly clenched hands.

A young male server—who couldn't have been more than twenty and looked like he could be a professional surfer—stopped in his tracks a few feet away. He glanced at my girl, then stared at me like a deer in headlights.

I held out my hand, and he quickly gave me a pink girly drink with a flowered umbrella, then scurried away. My eyes returned to the goddess I intended to claim, and I stepped forward until I was all she would see when she opened her eyes.

Chapter Two

BRIELLE

EVER SINCE MY BEST FRIEND TOLD ME SHE WAS GETTING MARRIED IN THE Florida Keys, I had been looking forward to spending as much time in the sun as I could. Although I lived in Miami, I didn't spend much time at the pool or beach. At least not since I graduated from the University of Miami. I was only twenty-six, but I had left my party days far behind. Except for the kick-butt bachelorette party I'd planned for Avery.

As the executive assistant to vice president of accounting at CM Creative, an advertising agency with offices in Miami and New York City, my schedule was hectic and unpredictable at times. Spending a week at an oceanfront resort with no boss to answer to—except for Avery since I was her maid of honor—sounded like heaven to me.

I flew in yesterday with Avery and her fiancé but stayed busy helping her with wedding stuff until I went to bed last night. Luckily, Gabe would keep her busy today, so I had plenty of time to myself. And I planned to take full advantage of it.

First up was working on my tan so I looked amazing in my bridesmaid dress. With its scoop neckline, spaghetti straps, and open back in a gorgeous shade of pink, I needed as few tan lines as possible. Hence the teeny tiny bikini that showed more skin than any of my other suits. When I came down to the pool this morning, I was relieved to find it was mostly deserted. The few people down here hadn't paid any attention when I'd stripped out of my cover-up and got comfortable on one of the loungers.

But when I dipped into the water to cool off half an hour ago, I realized that the pool had become quite crowded after lunch.

Although I had been down here almost all day, I decided to give myself another hour of tanning before I headed up to rinse off in the shower and figure out what I wanted to do for dinner.

So when some rude person decided to stand over me and block the sun while I was only halfway through that time, I wasn't a happy camper. The server bringing me delicious cocktails had always approached from behind to set the glass on the table next to my lounge, so I knew it couldn't be him. Since one of the few open chairs was right next to me, I assumed it was probably someone wanting to ask me when I'd be done so they could take mine too.

My eyes drifted open as I snapped, "I'm trying to..."

The guy in front of me was so hot, I lost the ability to speak for a moment. My words trailed off as I gawked at the six feet two inches of masculine perfection. He was probably a good ten to fifteen years older than me, but that didn't take away from his good looks at all. If anything, the age difference only made him hotter.

He was wearing a pair of swim trunks without a shirt, giving me a great view of the six-pack abs between the slight smattering of hair on his chest and the happy trail that dipped into his trunks. He had dirty blond hair that probably came to just above his shoulders when it was down, stubble that looked as though he hadn't shaved for at least a week, and piercing blue eyes.

"Um, hi." I took a shuddering sigh. "Sorry."

"No apology necessary, sweetheart. I'm the one who was blocking your sun." I finally noticed he was holding two glasses, one of which was the same kind of frozen cocktail I had been drinking this afternoon, when he moved closer to set the drinks on the table. "But I figured I could save the server a trip since I was already headed over here."

"Oh." My lips formed a perfect circle as I stared up at him. Gesturing to the unoccupied lounge next to me, I asked, "Planning to claim that chair?"

"I am," he confirmed, removing his sunglasses to set them on the table next to his scotch.

I liked how decisive his response was. And how I practically felt his heated gaze—now that I could see his blue eyes—on every inch of my ample curves as it drifted down my body. Dropping onto the chair, he didn't look away from me. Not even for a second.

Instead of stretching out to get comfortable, he sat facing me with his legs over the edge and feet on the ground. Resting an elbow on his thigh while he stretched the other hand toward me, his lips curved into a sexy smirk. "I'm Lennox."

"I'm Brielle." My voice was soft as I slid my palm against his, goose bumps popping up along my arm. "But my friends call me Brie."

Instead of releasing my hand, he gripped it tightly. "Are you here for vacation, Brie? Or are you local to the Keys?"

"Vacation," I replied, smiling at how he took my explanation as an invitation to use my nickname.

His thumb stroked over my ring finger. "By yourself?"

"With my best friend." Technically, I was at the resort with hundreds of other people here for Avery and Gabe's wedding. But my brain was apparently too addled for me to say more than a few words at a time.

He quirked a brow, his voice dropping an octave as he asked, "A female friend?"

My startled laughter helped me to relax and loosened my tongue so I could actually talk. "She's definitely a girl. Our college wouldn't have put us together in the same dorm room our freshman year if she wasn't."

I should have objected to the third degree from a stranger and avoided giving out any personal details. If my dad was here, he'd have a lot to say about how much information I was sharing with Lennox. Not that I would have even gotten the chance to speak to him if I was on vacation with my family because my dad was beyond overprotective.

But I had never felt an instant attraction like this before, and my instincts said that Lennox would never do anything to hurt me.

"Good." A popular song came on the radio at the poolside bar, and someone turned up the volume. Lennox leaned closer so I could hear him. "How long is your trip?"

"I don't leave for another week." My plans for downtime suddenly flew out the window. Other than the bachelorette party tomorrow and the bridal party spa day on Wednesday, I didn't have a ton to do for Avery until the rehearsal dinner on Saturday night. That left plenty of time to get to know Lennox better. Maybe even to

have my first ever vacation fling. Or more if the butterflies swirling in my belly were any indication. "How about you?"

"I just got in and will be here until Monday morning."

I grinned at him. "Same as me. Perfect."

"I already thought a weekend at the beach was pretty damn perfect"—he gave my fingers a gentle squeeze, making me realize we'd been holding hands the entire time—"but now that I've met you, my trip has already gotten better."

"That's incredibly sweet of you to say."

"I've never been accused of being sweet before." He jerked his chin toward my drink. "I think you've confused me with that pink concoction the server was bringing over to you."

I lifted the glass, wrapped my lips around the straw, and took a gulp of the frosty beverage. I'd hoped it would cool me off, but the way Lennox stared at my mouth made me sweat for a whole different reason.

"Are you hungry?"

I looked at him over the rim of my glass and nodded. "Uh-huh."

"I'm taking you to lunch." His blue eyes filled with heat as his gaze swept down my body again. "After you cover up."

Chapter Three

LENNOX

BRIE RAISED AN EYEBROW, BUT RATHER THAN BECOMING ANGRY, A corner of her mouth quirked up, and her blue orbs twinkled with amusement.

"I suppose I'm a little underdressed for a restaurant."

She sat up, and I tried not to ogle her tits as they jiggled in her barely-there bikini top. When she leaned over to reach for her pool bag, there was way too much on display, and I almost lost my shit. I tossed my towel aside and had my shirt pulled down over Brie's head before she knew what was happening.

"What...?" Her expression indicated that she thought I might be a crazy person, but she didn't stop me from pulling her arms through the holes and dragging the shirt down to cover the rest of her body. It was so big on her that she could have worn it as a dress. And she looked unbelievably adorable.

Seeing her wearing my clothes set off something primal inside me, and a wave of possessiveness slammed into me.

"I have a cover-up in my bag, Lennox," she huffed, putting one hand on an ample hip while the other gesticulated to emphasize her point.

Holy fuck. Hearing her say my name in that low and naturally sultry voice almost made me come right then and there.

Grabbing ahold of my patience, I shrugged. "I doubt it would cover you to my satisfaction. Besides, I like seeing you in my clothes."

Brie bit down on her plump bottom lip and rolled her eyes, but again, I could see the merriment sparkling in her baby blues.

I pushed to my feet and held out my hand, staring straight into her eyes and not bothering to hide my intentions.

She glanced at my hand, then back to my face, clearly contemplating her next move. We both knew what would happen if she accepted my offer.

Slowly, she placed her palm in mine, and I held in a sigh of relief. I helped her to her feet, then bent over and grabbed her bag, slinging it over my shoulder.

"I can take that," she insisted, reaching for her tote.

"We should probably get one thing straight right now," I said in reply, using my grip on her to pull her body in close. "I take care of what's mine. That means I carry your bags, open your door, spoil you rotten, and anything else I think you need."

Brie's eyes darkened, and her nipples puckered, poking through her bikini top and my shirt. She licked her lips, and I couldn't help groaning as I pictured that plush, wet mouth wrapped around my cock.

Her breathing had become choppy, and she inhaled deeply, clearly trying to calm down. But I didn't want her to. I wanted her hot, needy, desperate for the pleasure only I could—only I would—ever give her.

"I need to take it with me back to my room," she explained softly. Her voice didn't sound convincing, and she didn't attempt to take the bag. "Where do you want to meet for lunch? I'm not sure what to change into."

"What you have on is just fine for my plans," I told her as I tucked her arm into mine and began walking us toward the entrance to the hotel. "You won't be wearing it long," I murmured. I didn't know if she heard me, and she gave no indication either way.

It was the middle of the day, so the lobby was bustling with guests headed to their activities. I deftly steered us through the crowd until we reached the bank of elevators.

The growing tension between us was thick, and I wondered if the people around us could sense it. Our attraction practically crackled in the air like electricity.

Finally, the doors to the elevator on my right slid open, and I guided Brie to the back. People crammed in like sardines, and I was afraid someone might feel the evidence of my desire for Brie, so I moved her to stand in front of me.

I didn't care if she felt my big, hard cock pressing against her ass. In fact, I grinned when a shudder passed through her body. Bending my head, I buried my face in her soft, coconut-scented curls.

"Damn, you smell good," I muttered, just loud enough that only she would hear me. I was willing to bet my football team that she tasted just as delicious.

As we ascended, the car began to empty. By the time we reached my floor, only another couple remained in the space with us. I raised my head and moved to Brie's side, slipping my arm around her waist.

My eyes strayed to the young couple, and a growl rumbled in my throat when I realized that the man was staring at my woman. Brie glanced up at me curiously, but I barely noticed because my eyes were glued to the little shit eyeing my girl's curves with lust on his face.

At my sound of displeasure, he tore his gaze from Brie, and it landed on me. Obviously, he understood my murderous scowl because he immediately looked down and turned to the woman he was standing with.

She looked up at him with an expression of adoration, then held out her left hand and admired a sparkling diamond on her ring finger.

The asshole slung his arm around her and that's when I saw the gold band on his own finger. I wanted to vomit, then beat the shit out of the sick son of a bitch. But Brie was my number one priority, and I didn't want her witnessing, or being this close to a brawl. Nor did I want to risk ending up in jail.

So I kept my hands to myself as we exited the elevator. But just as the doors were about to close, Brie spun around and stuck her hand out to hold them open. "You can do better than this creep," she told the girl, then stood back and let the doors silently come together before the car whooshed out of sight.

I took her chin between my fingers and raised her face so I was grinning down at her. "Nicely done, baby. And sexy as hell."

Brie's cheeks turned pink, and her eyes sparkled with pleasure. "My mom and dad made sure I knew how to recognize a creep when I see one," she shared. "I'd love to get married and have kids, but if a man doesn't look at me the way my dad looks at my mom, he's not worth it. I'll wait for one who does."

Her answer just proved yet again how perfect she was for me. But it wasn't the time to get that serious, so I resumed our trek to my room as I queried, "Your parents are still in love?"

"Disgustingly so," Brie replied with a laugh. "After thirty-seven years together and nine kids, they still act like newlyweds."

It was clear from her tone she loved them and admired their relationship. Apparently, I had a lot to live up to, but I wasn't worried. Brielle became my obsession from the minute I first saw her, and I had no doubt it would only grow through the years.

Again, I was reminded of my friend Justice. He and his wife had been together since she was eighteen and had a gaggle of kids. I was willing to bet he would get along great with Brie's dad.

We finally reached the end of the hall, and I retrieved my phone from the pocket of my trunks. "Nine, huh?" I asked as I unlocked the door with the hotel app. "And where are you in the lineup?"

"Number seven. I have two younger brothers. One three minutes and the other a little over a year."

"You're a twin?" I asked and pushed the door open, gesturing for her to enter first.

"Yes. Hollis and I are actually the second set of twins."

Once we were inside, I shut the door and stood facing it for a moment, trying to get control of myself so I didn't grab her and take her straight to bed.

"What about you?" Her voice trembled a little, and I immediately turned around, concerned at what had frightened her. But she didn't look scared. She appeared nervous and excited as she switched her weight from foot to foot.

"I have an older sister. We're eight years apart, so she sometimes thinks she's my mother." I smiled, thinking about how Amy would react when she found out about Brie. She'd be over the fucking moon, and I'd finally get peace from her badgering. "I'm actually closer to my nephew..." I suddenly remembered my dinner plans. There was no way in hell that I would be ready to leave this room before I had to go to Gabe's bachelor party tomorrow night. "Shit. I need to make a call."

Brie's brow went up, but she just nodded and moved toward the couch. I almost forgot all about Gabe again because I was mesmerized by the sway of Brielle's full hips and round ass. With her figure, blond hair, and blue eyes, I had a feeling she was often

compared to Marilyn Monroe. *Sorry, Norma Jean, you can't hold a candle to my Brie.*

"You said you have to make a call?" Brie's question broke me out of my lustful trance, and I shook my head to try to clear it.

"Right."

I brought up Gabe's number and hit call before raising my phone to my ear. Brie glanced around, then back at me. "Do you want some privacy?"

I frowned. "Why?" I didn't have anything to hide from her. Before she could answer, Gabe picked up.

"What's up?"

"I have to cancel tonight. I...made other plans."

Gabe was silent. Then he laughed. "No way."

"Pardon?"

"You met someone!" he crowed.

"How the fuck do you know that?" I growled.

"When I asked you to be a groomsman and you had to turn me down because of work commitments, I could tell you felt like complete shit. No way would you cancel on Avery and me unless it was for a woman."

I chuckled because he wasn't wrong. "Just don't tell your mom," I said firmly. "I don't need her banging on my door and demanding to know when the wedding is."

"I'll take your request under consideration," he teased. "See you Tuesday for the bachelor party?"

"Of course," I confirmed.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

I rolled my eyes and hung up.

After turning off my phone, I set it on one of the end tables and turned my attention to the goddess who had quickly become the center of my universe.

Brie was watching me with an expression that seemed hesitant but also intrigued. The chemistry between us crackled again, and I debated whether to give in or get a grip on myself and do the dinner thing first.

Ultimately, I decided to feed her first. She would need the energy for all the things I had planned for later.

Chapter Four

LENNOX

AFTER ORDERING OUR MEAL, I JOINED BRIE ON THE COUCH AND immediately pulled her onto my lap to straddle me. My hands slipped under her shirt to rest on her hips, and when my fingers touched her bare skin, I would've sworn sparks erupted.

Brie placed her hands on my shoulders, and I was about to lean in and finally find out if I'd been right about her taste, but she stopped me with a question.

"Wedding?"

I sighed. "My sister has made it her mission in life to see me married and settled. When she finds out about you, she'll get nosy and try to meddle. I don't want any interruptions to my time with you."

"And just what do you have planned for this uninterrupted time?" Brie's smile was sly, and her fingers slid up to the back of my neck to tangle in my hair.

I glided my palms over her hips and around to cup her ass cheeks. Then I yanked her forward so my big, hard cock was nestled against her pussy. "First, I'm going to feed you. Second, I'm going to taste every inch of this sexy-as-sin body. And finally, I'm going to fuck you until you're screaming my name in mindless ecstasy." I bent my head and licked a path up her neck to her earlobe. I nibbled it and whispered, "Then I plan to do it all over again."

Pulling back, I smiled wickedly. Her skin was flushed and her blue eyes were glittering with desire. "Um..." she mumbled dazedly.

Leaning in, I kept our gazes locked as I closed the distance between our lips. Hers felt like plush velvet against mine, and I

immediately wanted more. My tongue skimmed along the seam of her mouth, and she sucked in a fast breath, giving me the opening I wanted.

I swept my tongue inside and groaned. *Coconut*. I'd always liked the taste of coconut, but it was quickly becoming my favorite flavor.

A knock on the door broke through the haze of lust consuming me, and I growled in frustration. *What had I been thinking?* Oh, right. That we needed to eat in order to get through the marathon fucking session that would follow.

I reluctantly ended our kiss and rested my forehead against hers, then sighed and lifted her off my lap. My eyes dropped to the tent in my trunks. My hard-on wasn't going down anytime soon, so I grabbed my towel as I stood and wrapped it around my waist.

When I opened the door, a female staff member waited with a small table on wheels. Her eyes did a slow perusal of my body, and when her gaze returned to my face, she licked her lips. I frowned, annoyed with her inappropriate behavior. But she obviously didn't take the hint because she smiled in a way that I assumed was supposed to be seductive. She didn't wait for me to invite her in, just pushed the table into the room. "Room service." Her tone was sultry, and her hungry gaze lingered on my bare chest.

Seriously pissed, I opened my mouth to tell her to get the fuck out and expect to be unemployed the next day. Before I could get a word out, a throat cleared, and Brie stepped in front of me. She put her clenched fists on her hips and snapped, "I don't believe we ordered any tarts."

The server looked confused, and I couldn't help laughing. I slid my arms around Brie and hauled her back against me, letting her know just what her possessive display was doing to me.

"I believe *my woman* was trying to be polite. A tart is another word for a whore." The server gasped, but I kept speaking. "I, however, have no such qualms. So keep your eyes off what doesn't belong to you and get your slutty ass out of our room."

The woman's eyes went wide and round, and her skin turned bright red. She sputtered something unintelligible before spinning around and darting out of the room, letting the door slam behind her.

Brie giggled, and I spun her around so she was smiling up at me.

"Do you have any idea how fucking hot that was?" I didn't wait for her to answer. Palming her ass, I brought her as close as possible and slammed my mouth down over hers.

Brie's display of jealousy had blown my good intentions to smithereens. *Fuck it. We'll eat later.*

Keeping our lips locked, I managed to walk us over to the bed without running into anything. But I ended the kiss as I lowered her to the bed. I drank in the sight of her for a moment, then grabbed the hem of her shirt and slowly lifted it. Brielle sat up and raised her arms to help me get it off. Then she fell back on the mattress and watched me with heated eyes as I straddled her on my knees.

I slid my arms beneath her, and she arched her back to give me better access. Unable to resist, I used my teeth to pull down the fabric covering one of her gorgeous tits and wrapped my lips around the stiff nipple. Once the catch on the back was released, I tugged her bra from her body and tossed it aside. With the other breast bared, I switched my attention to it.

Brielle's hands threaded into my hair, dislodging the elastic holding it back. As the strands fell forward, she ran her fingers through it and sighed. "I've always hated longer hair on men, but damn...you make it unbelievably sexy."

"I better be the only one you find sexy," I growled after letting her nipple go with a pop. Cupping her breasts, I leaned down and brushed my lips over hers before whispering, "Because you're the only woman I see. I didn't think someone could be so beautiful, so sexy, and so intelligent. Now that I've found you, I intend to keep you."

Her pretty blue eyes brightened, but she looked slightly hesitant, as if she wasn't quite sure what I meant. Showing seemed like a better route than telling, so I quickly jumped up and removed her bottoms, then stripped out of my trunks.

Brielle's gaze was locked on my cock as the shaft bounced off my stomach while I climbed onto the bed. I was a big man everywhere, and I had no doubt she was probably worried about my giant dick fitting into her tight pussy. "Relax, baby. I'll go slow. I promise I will make this good for you."

"Well, um...it's just that...I, um..."

I frowned at her nervous rambling. It was almost as though she was a virgin. The thought sent a streak of pleasure straight to my

cock, and precome dripped onto her soft belly. Nothing would keep me from wanting Brielle, but the possessive asshole inside me loved the idea of being the only man to ever have her pussy wrapped around their cock and their come filling her womb.

"This is so embarrassing," she muttered, covering her face with her hands.

"Baby"—I peeled her hands away so I could look her in the eye—"you don't ever have to be embarrassed with me. Or of anything that happens between us."

Brielle huffed, and her cheeks turned pink. "Being a twenty-six-year-old virgin seems like the exception to that rule."

I was stunned at her revelation and so fucking turned on that I nearly climaxed right then. Brielle began to retreat within herself, and I realized it was because she was taking my silence as a negative sign.

"You're a virgin?" I croaked. "How is that possible?"

She scrunched her nose adorably and answered in a defensive tone. "Guys were just never really on my radar. My dad was a little overprotective"—knowing Justice, that was an understatement—"and boys my age aren't ready to be committed like my mom and dad are to each other. That's what I want, so I never found anyone I wanted to be with like this."

"Baby," I groaned as I cupped her face in my palms. "I am fucking honored that you chose me. It probably makes me a bastard, but I love the idea that you belong to me and only me."

Brielle held her breath, staring at me as if she couldn't believe what I was saying. "Okay," she finally whispered, smiling shyly.

"Are you sure you—"

"Lennox?"

"Yeah?"

Brielle bit her lip for a second, then tangled her fingers in my hair and demanded, "Shut up and kiss me."

I grinned. "Whatever you want, baby. It's yours." Then I lay down, covering her body with mine as my lips sealed over hers.

The air practically crackled from the electric sparks between us. Then it exploded, and the ravenous hunger clawing at me was suddenly all-consuming. My hands traveled all over her body, caressing every inch of bare skin I could reach. Our tongues danced as we feasted on each other.

Once I had memorized all of her amazing curves, I slid my mouth down her neck, leaving a trail of hot kisses. Her fingers clenched my hair when I licked and sucked at each nipple before continuing my descent.

I licked around her belly button, then sat up and spread her legs so I could lay down between them. My broad shoulders held her thighs open, and I groaned at the sight of her dripping pink center. "So beautiful," I murmured.

"Lennox?" Brielle's voice trembled, and I looked up to see her watching me with trepidation. There went that possessive Neanderthal again, beating his chest at knowing that she'd never had another man between her soft thighs.

"Do you trust me, baby?"

She nodded immediately, and I felt as though I'd just been handed the world.

I bent my head and dragged my tongue up her seam, then licked between her folds from bottom to top.

"Oh!" Brielle squeaked as her hips bucked.

I grinned before diving in and making a meal out of her unbelievably delicious pussy. "Fuck, you taste amazing," I groaned after stabbing my stiffened tongue into her channel a few times. My fingers manipulated her clit, and when I licked inside her, her juices filled my mouth. "Still hungry," I grunted before eating her some more.

Brielle's pelvis was thrusting up, searching for more, and her cries of passion were steadily escalating. I couldn't wait until she was screaming my name.

Switching between my fingers and tongue, I worked her bundle of nerves and the special pleasure spot inside her.

"Lennox?"

"Relax, baby," I crooned. "Just let your body go."

She nodded jerkily and laid her hands by her sides. But the second my mouth was back on her, they tunneled into my hair, and she clutched the strands so hard, my scalp prickled. The sensation went straight to my painfully hard cock, and I had to grab the base and squeeze for a few seconds to hold off my orgasm.

Gently, I extricated her hands and guided them up to her breasts. "Play with your tits, baby." She looked unsure, so I tweaked a nipple while flicking her clit and her eyes began to glaze over. "Trust me.

Just close your eyes and pretend it's my hands teasing those perfect breasts."

The next time I wrapped my lips around her clit, she pinched her nipples and her back arched, thrusting her hips up. "Lennox! Yes!"

"Good, baby." Satisfied that she'd do as I instructed, I doubled my efforts to give her pleasure. When she was just about to reach the peak, I palmed her ass with one hand, using the pinky to tease her puckered hole, while I sucked her clit hard and fucked her with my other index finger.

"Lennox! Oh, yes! Yes!" Brielle screamed, her legs clamping around my head as her climax crashed over her. Her pussy suddenly gushed into my mouth, and I greedily drank it all down. I knew she'd be responsive, but her reaction had been even better than I imagined.

When I wiped my mouth and rose onto my knees, confusion swirled with the passion in her blue pools. Her breaths were choppy, making her breasts bounce, but I tried not to let them distract me while I reassured her about whatever was worrying her.

"What's wrong, baby?"

"What...um...what just happened?"

I raised an eyebrow. "I'm assuming you're talking about something other than your orgasm?"

"Yes. Um, that other thing..." Her cheeks burned as her gaze bounced around. "I couldn't stop it. Did I...?"

I couldn't help the grin that split my face when I realized what she was rambling about. She didn't appreciate my reaction, but I gently petted her pussy and was happy to see her relax a little.

"You squirted, baby. You're so responsive, so passionate, I knew I'd be able to get you there. And fuck, it tasted better than anything I've ever had in my mouth."

"That's normal?" she asked skeptically.

I shrugged. "It doesn't matter what's considered normal, Brielle. All that matters is what happens between us."

Her expression turned soft, and I climbed up her body, taking her lips in a deep kiss as I rubbed my aching cock against her wet pussy. After a moment, I slipped just the tip inside and her walls clamped down. Brielle gasped, and a deep groan ripped from my chest.

"You feel fucking amazing, baby," I grunted as I slowly pushed in a little more. She was tight as hell, and it was a struggle not to

simply shove my dick all the way inside until I was sheathed from root to tip. She was already going to be sore when I popped her cherry, so I didn't want to make it worse.

As I worked my way in, it suddenly occurred that one of the reasons it felt so incredible was that I'd gone in bare. The thought that maybe I should pull out flitted through my mind, but then Brielle arched her back, and her pussy squeezed my cock like a fist, leaving no room in my brain for anything besides the pure bliss of being inside my woman.

When I reached the thin barrier of her virginity, I made sure she was overwhelmed with pleasure before I drove in, breaking through it and seating myself completely. "Fuck," I rasped, forcing myself to stay still and let Brielle adjust to my size.

I kissed away the tears leaking from her eyes and murmured sweet words about how perfect she was, how beautiful, and how unbelievable she felt wrapped around my cock. After a minute, her muscles began to relax, and I shifted my hips experimentally.

"Oh, Lennox!" Brielle breathed as a shudder wracked her body. Her legs circled my waist, and the new angle caused me to slip in even farther. "You feel so good," she moaned.

It was all the permission I needed. I withdrew, then plunged back in, starting slow and working my way up to fast and hard. "Damn, baby," I groaned. "I could live inside your pussy. So fucking tight. Fuck! Oh, fuck, Brielle. Fuck!!"

"Oh, yes! Lennox! Yes!" Brielle cried as she spiraled upward.

My spine was tingling and my vision blurring, so I pressed my thumb on her clit and slammed into her twice more before she detonated, screaming with rapture as she exploded. Her pussy rippled around my dick and squeezed hard enough to push me over the edge, and I buried my face in her neck, groaning her name as I filled her with my seed.

I had no idea how long it took for our hearts to stop pounding and our breathing to return to normal. The only thing on my mind was how it felt to have a naked, sated Brielle cuddled in my arms. Knowing I would have this for the rest of my life made it easy to simply relax and fall asleep.

Chapter Five

BRIELLE

WAKING UP IN LENNOX'S ARMS AFTER THE INCREDIBLE NIGHT WE'D spent together was the perfect start to my day. Even in his sleep, he hadn't let me go. His body was wrapped around mine with his hand splayed over my lower belly. Between traveling and the thorough job he'd done of introducing me to sex, he had to be exhausted. When I finally slipped out of his hold and scooted off the mattress, he rolled over as he mumbled my name under his breath—sending butterflies swirling in my belly. I forced myself to back away from the temptation he presented.

I would have loved to stay in bed with Lennox all day, but I didn't have much of a choice. I had a ton of stuff to do for Avery's bachelorette party tonight, and I didn't want to let my best friend down.

It wasn't until I was in the bathroom that I was hit with a glaring fact that I should've thought about long before now. Lennox hadn't used a condom any of the times we'd had sex. I briefly considered shaking him awake to ask what he'd been thinking, but I had a hunch that would only lead to another bout of unprotected sex. Which didn't freak me out nearly as much as it should have, except for the part where I'd get too distracted to worry about hosting everyone for the party tonight.

I had to remind myself how much I loved my best friend when I padded out of the bathroom and got dressed, throwing Lennox's shirt from yesterday over my bikini. When I hadn't been naked, I'd worn his clothes. Since it smelled like him, I was hoping it would

give me my Lennox fix—because yes, I was already hopelessly addicted to the man—until I could see him tomorrow.

My lips curved into a grin as I grabbed the pad and pen off the bedside table to leave him a note, telling him to get plenty of rest because I planned to wear him out again on Wednesday. And Thursday. And Friday. Then I left him my cell phone and room number.

My sigh was wistful as I left the note on the pillow next to him before tiptoeing out of the room and gently shutting the door behind me. As I walked away, I wanted to kick myself for not taking his room key so I could let myself back in later. But it was probably for the best because it was likely that I wouldn't have been able to resist dropping in over the next nine hours while I got everything ready for the party, showered, and changed into a cute outfit perfect for clubbing.

As I walked into The Wave fifteen minutes before the party started for a final check of all the details, I couldn't help but think about how Lennox would react to my dress. His caveman routine over my bikini had turned me on, so I found myself hoping I bumped into him at some point tonight. After I made sure my bestie had a wonderful night, of course.

Almost as though my thought of Avery had conjured her up, she walked into the club and made a beeline toward me. "Party time!"

"Let's get our drink on, girl!" I replied with a wink, jerking my thumb toward the tables on the main dance floor that were ours for the night. "I've got us set up over there."

After giving me a hug, Avery stepped back and grinned. "Wow, you must have needed a vacation more than I realized. You look great. Not too tan, more like you're glowing."

"Maybe it's just the dim lighting," I suggested, my cheeks heating as I thought about what—or who—was truly responsible for my glow.

Avery was close enough to catch the blush, and her eyes narrowed. "You wouldn't be keeping secrets from me, would you, Brie?"

"Um..." I bit my lip to keep from blurting out the whole story.

Wagging her finger, she didn't give me the chance to deny her accusation. "Because that would be bad on a regular day, but it would be even worse today. At the bachelorette party you're

throwing me because I picked you to be my maid of honor. Seeing as you mean the world to me and all.”

“Oh, my gosh! Stop with the guilt trip already. I’ll tell you,” I laughed, shaking my head.

“You better hurry before everyone else interrupts us,” she urged with a satisfied smirk.

I knew Avery wouldn’t judge me for what had happened between Lennox and me, no matter how quickly I’d fallen into bed with the sexy older man. She would show me the same support that I gave her when she fell head over heels into an office romance with Gabe—after months of trying to convince her to take a chance on him. But I felt the flutter of nerves, biting my bottom lip before I confessed, “I met someone at the pool Sunday.”

“You met someone?” she shrieked, her eyes going wide as her smile grew.

“Shh,” I hissed, wrapping my fingers around her forearm to lead her over to our table. It was early enough in the night that the club wasn’t crowded yet, so we’d have a little privacy over there. At least until the live band started and the dance floor filled up with people.

“C’mon, don’t leave me in suspense. Tell me about your guy,” Avery pleaded.

“He’s...” I tried to find the perfect way to describe the man who I had handed my virginity to—and I was pretty sure my heart went right along with it—in such a short time. “Somehow everything,” I answered with a dreamy sigh.

“Aw, that’s so sweet.” She laced our fingers together and squeezed my hand. “How did you meet?”

I told her about how he approached me at the pool, that he’d made me wear his shirt so nobody could see my body—even though I’d had a cover-up with me—and my jealous reaction to the room service attendant when she’d brought our dinner.

When I was done, she quirked a brow and drawled, “And?”

“And what?” I tried to look as innocent as possible, but I was fighting a smile.

Avery knew me too well to fall for my act. Planting her hands on her hips, she huffed, “And what happened next? Judging by your blush, I’m guessing things got at least a little steamy between you two.”

“More than a little,” I whispered, my face once again heating.

"Yes! I knew it!" She jumped up and down as she thrust her fist in the air. "How much more?"

I cleared my throat and gave her a look as I muttered, "Do I really have to say it when you obviously already know the answer?"

"I guess not," she conceded with a sigh. "But seriously, bow-chick-a-wow-wow."

I giggled so hard at her silliness that I had to bend over to catch my breath. "You're ridiculous."

"Yet you love me anyway."

Thinking about what Lennox and I could have done if we'd been able to spend the day together, I gave her a pointed look and quipped, "You have no idea how much."

"I bet you'll love me even more when I give a kick-butt maid of honor speech at your wedding to this guy. It'll be all about how you have me to thank for finding him since you guys met here." She did a little dance. "And if you're quick about it, maybe we'll even be pregnant at the same time, and our children will be best friends just like we are."

With how many times Lennox had filled me with his come, it was more than possible that I was already pregnant. But I couldn't think about that right now. Not unless I wanted to bail on Avery's party to go look for Lennox so we could talk about why he hadn't bothered with protection. And what he planned to do if I was carrying a souvenir of this trip in my womb. "Since you're all loved up with Gabe, you're looking at this through rose-colored glasses, Avery. For all I know, this is just a vacation fling to him, and we'll never see each other after we leave."

"Nah, he was smart enough to scoop you right up. No way will he let you go that easily," she insisted.

I hoped she was right. Giving voice to my biggest fear made it seem like a bigger possibility in my mind. Pasting a smile on my face so I didn't worry her, I greeted the rest of our friends as they arrived for the party. And every time doubt crept in throughout the night, I reminded myself of the fact that I'd be able to spend the next three days with Lennox. We'd have plenty of time to figure out what we wanted from each other before I was busy again with the rehearsal dinner on Saturday night and the wedding on Sunday. It would be more than enough time for him to figure out that he never wanted to

let me go. It had to be...because I'd already decided we belonged together forever.

Chapter Six

LENNOX

DESPITE BEING MAD AS HELL, I MANAGED TO PASTE A SMILE ON MY FACE as I walked into the event room on the top floor of the hotel. The floor-to-ceiling windows meant this room had a 360° view of the beaches and other beautiful resort facilities. The room was mostly decorated in creams and browns, with dark wood furniture. The space had a masculine feel, accentuated even further by the handful of round tables set up for the men to play poker. Each one had a dealer and the supplies to run just about any type of card game.

There was a buffet with steaks and a variety of mouthwatering sides, a bar that most likely served some of the finest liquor around, and a few boxes of Cubans for those who wanted to enjoy a cigar.

Rhys, Gabe's best man, had done a great job with the bachelor party—I'd been glad to hear Avery would relieve Gabe of his balls if there were strippers. That had never been my scene. Not that I had a problem with it, but especially now that I'd met Brie—who I would be spanking as soon as I found her—I only had interest in seeing one woman naked.

Unfortunately, said woman had snuck out on me while I was still sleeping this morning. I'd been utterly shocked to wake up alone, and even more so to find that she hadn't left so much as a note. I knew I hadn't misread the signs; she'd been just as attracted to me as I was to her. As I'd searched the room for something, anything that would lead me to her, my bafflement gave way to anger.

Then I saw the tinge of pink and dried come on the bed and vowed to spank Brie's ass until it was cherry red when I found her.

Not only had she let me pop her cherry but she could also already be pregnant with our baby.

I hurried to take a shower, grumbling about how I should have just taken her ass to Vegas last night, and threw on a T-shirt and jeans. Once I was dressed, I went down to the front desk and tried to cajole the staff into helping me figure out Brie's last name and what room she was staying in.

Eventually, I asked to see the manager even though Sebastian Brant had a reputation for being a straight arrow. As expected, no amount of money would sway him. He'd tried to hide it, but I could tell he knew something. His smirk and cryptic, "Perhaps you'll find your Cinderella at the wedding," had nearly earned him a broken jaw. However, I couldn't blame him for doing his job. I knew how important discretion was, not only because I lived my life in the limelight but it was also paramount when it came to dealing with the New York Nighthawks.

"Uncle Lennox."

Speaking of football. I rolled my eyes at the moniker, but my smile turned genuine when my nephew, Hunter, walked up to give me a sideways hug.

"Hey, kid." When we stepped apart, I crossed my arms over my chest and raised an eyebrow. "You only call me uncle when you want something."

Hunter grinned, and I was struck by how much he and Gabe looked alike. They took after their father, falling into the tall, dark, and handsome category. Whereas their mother and I were both blue-eyed with dark blond hair. He checked his watch, then met my gaze with a confident glint in his eye.

"So...Anthony Bryant..."

I barked a laugh and shook my head. "I love that you boys have balls," I said, honestly. "You want to talk about my new starting wide receiver? The one who was awarded the Heisman two years in a row? The one who is costing me a fucking fortune?"

"I heard he just fired his agent," Hunter said conversationally.

He represented a couple of my players, but he'd earned those accounts without a single word from me. In fact, he'd never come to me for a favor before, but I knew exactly why it was happening now.

Anthony Bryant was young, and his father had been pretty much running his career from the beginning. He guarded his son like a

fucking pit bull. However, Anthony had begun to stand up to him from time to time, trying to take control of his own life. Accepting the offer from the Nighthawks had been his first major move that went against his father's wishes.

"And you want me to make an introduction?"

Hunter laughed, then briefly glanced at the timepiece on his wrist again before saying, "I don't need you to sell me, Lennox. Just get me in a room with him."

"Alone," I clarified.

He raised an eyebrow as if to say, "Obviously."

"As long as you don't have him shopping for a new team..." I paused, and my eyes darted over to one of the groomsmen. "Unless Miles is looking to move...?" Miles Hensley, a close friend of Gabe's, was a star wide receiver who played for the Phoenix Dragons. He was well on his way to The Football Hall of Fame. If there was any way I could lure him away, I would take it.

Hunter chuckled and shook his head. "Good luck with that."

"I figured as much. Couldn't hurt to ask."

Hunter checked his watch for the third time, and I studied him curiously. "Need to be somewhere?"

"Um..."

"Go," I encouraged. "I'll talk to my manager about a meetup with Bryant, and we'll touch base next week."

Hunter tossed me a grateful smile before walking away.

I walked to one of the windows and stared down at the pool, wondering how the fuck I was going to find Brielle. Then it hit me. *Jonah Carrington.*

Digging my phone out of my pocket, I found a quiet corner and called the man who handled the cyber security for the Nighthawks. Jonah was the best in the business and Justice had made the introduction, giving me his stamp of approval to his friend.

"Carrington," Jonah grunted when he picked up. He must have checked his caller ID a second later because he said, "Lennox Madison. What can I do for you?"

"Jonah," I greeted. "I need a favor."

I explained the situation to him, then listened to him laugh. His amusement didn't piss me off because I knew he understood the way I was feeling. He'd fallen for his wife the moment he met her

and was every bit as possessive and obsessed as I'd become with Brielle.

"I'll call you as soon as I find her," he said, still chuckling. "And you should probably prepare yourself for Justice to give you plenty of shit about finding the one and then losing her."

"I guess there's no chance you won't tell him," I muttered.

"Nope," he replied with a snicker. "Talk soon."

Then he hung up, leaving me irritated and restless. I tried to get my mind off Brielle by playing a little poker and drinking a little too much scotch, but it was useless. When I went back to my room that night, I couldn't stop reliving my time with my woman. It left me in a very uncomfortable state, so I slept like shit.

The next few days should have been time for me to unwind and enjoy my first vacation in more years than I could remember. Instead, I spent it working to keep my mind occupied. Otherwise, I'd taken to brooding.

The only time I was somewhat distracted was Wednesday morning when I went golfing with Gabe and some of the other guys. My nephew had asked about my mood, but I didn't want him to spend any of his time trying to help me. He deserved to have a week with nothing on his plate except marrying the woman of his dreams.

By the next morning, I was fuming that I hadn't heard back from Jonah. The man could find anything and anyone. It might have taken more time if she were some elusive criminal, but it seemed highly unlikely that Brielle fell into that category. I sent him a text the following day and received a reply saying he'd hit a snag and would get back to me as soon as possible.

I had no fucking idea what "snag" meant, but Jonah wasn't someone who could be forced, bullied, or bought. He'd call me when he was ready, and nothing I could say or do would change that.

My sister and her husband dragged me from my room a couple of times, but I was shit company. I mostly distracted myself with work, staying holed up until the day of the rehearsal dinner.

I'd just finished knotting my tie when my cell phone began to ring. Picking it up from the nightstand where it was charging, I saw it was Jonah calling. I nearly ripped the cord out of the wall in my haste to answer it.

"It's about fucking time, Carrington," I snarled.

"Watch your tone, Lennox," he growled right back.

"Did you find her?"

Jonah was silent long enough to make me nervous, and I paced around the room to keep from shouting at him again.

"Yes."

I stopped walking and sighed in relief. "Thank fuck."

"You might not be so relieved when you hear what I have to say," he murmured.

"Pardon?" His odd tone made me anxious, and my feet began to move again.

"Remember that snag I mentioned?"

"Yes," I ground out through gritted teeth.

"It almost kept me from calling you back with what I discovered, but I know you, and you would never be this obsessed with a woman if it wasn't serious. And Justice thinks very highly of you, which will hopefully work out in your favor."

He had me thoroughly confused. "Jonah, what the fuck are you talking about?"

"Her name is Brielle Kendall."

It took a minute for the implications of what he'd just said to sink in. *Kendall? Fucking hell.* "Kendall isn't exactly an uncommon last name," I said, hoping he wasn't implying what I thought.

"No, it's not," he agreed. "But if you're hoping it's a coincidence, you're going to be very disappointed."

"Fuck," I muttered, running a hand through my hair. "Justice or Thatcher?" It didn't really matter. Both brothers were equally likely to make me disappear for touching one of their daughters.

"She's Justice's youngest daughter."

His baby girl. Shit. This was going to be extremely complicated. No way in hell was I letting Brielle go, but all the Kendall kids were extremely close with their parents. Causing a rift between Brielle and Justice would make her unhappy, and I'd sworn to myself that I would spend my life making her smile and light up with joy.

"Thanks for the heads-up. Send her information over. I have to get to a rehearsal dinner for my nephew, but as soon as it's over, I'll find her, and we'll figure out what happens next."

Jonah was quiet for a moment, then he spoke in a low tone as if imparting a secret. "Don't ever tell anyone what I'm about to say to you, or I'll kill you and make it look like an accident."

It wasn't an empty threat because Jonah was quite capable of following through. However, I would have agreed anyway. "You have my word."

"It's a fuck of a lot harder to keep a man away from your daughter if she's knocked up and has his ring on her finger."

He made an excellent point, and I hadn't planned on waiting very long to accomplish both of those things anyway. "Thanks."

"Good luck."

Jonah hung up, and I shoved my phone back into my pocket, grabbed my room key and wallet, and headed to the banquet room for the rehearsal dinner.

When I arrived, I gave both Gabe and Avery a hug and congratulated them again. A young woman with black hair, striking green eyes, and a clipboard tapped me on the shoulder. "Lennox Madison?"

"Yes?"

She smiled and reached out to shake my hand. "Hello, I'm Emma Hensley, the wedding planner. If you follow me, I'll show you where you're sitting."

Rhys suddenly stepped in front of us, glaring directly at the woman. "Emmaline," he growled. "We need to talk."

She raised her chin stubbornly and glared right back. "Save it for your speech," she snipped haughtily. "And don't call me Emmaline." Then she turned her head and sent me another bright smile. "Don't mind him. My brother is nervous about his best man duties. Come this way."

She stepped around him, ignoring his next words. "I am not your fucking brother," Rhys said in a deadly tone.

I suddenly realized who these two were. Gabe had mentioned Rhys' step-sister—Miles's twin—because she was also one of Avery's best friends. From what he'd said, Rhys and Emma couldn't stand each other. But as she marched away, he watched her with a mix of emotions. Ones I recognized well because they'd been eating at me for days. Anger, desire, obsession, and possession.

I gave him an empathetic look before following Emma to my seat. The wedding party would be seated at a long table in front, while family and friends sat at round tables situated throughout the room. My sister smiled at me as I took the chair next to her, but

when she clocked my frustrated expression, she sighed. "Still moping?"

My eyes narrowed at her. "Grown men do not mope."

She opened her mouth to reply, but my attention was suddenly diverted to the front of the room. Shocked, I froze in my seat as the woman of my dreams slid into the chair reserved for the maid of honor. Before I could react, Emma cleared her throat and announced that it was time to start and asked everyone to be seated.

"Why don't you start things off, Brielle?" she asked before sitting at a table with Avery's parents.

Brielle muttered something to Avery, then stood up and smiled, her eyes scanning the room. "I'm terrible at speeches. And—" Her words abruptly halted as her gaze landed on me.

Chapter Seven

BRIELLE

I BLINKED A FEW TIMES, CERTAIN I WAS HALLUCINATING WHEN I SPOTTED Lennox sitting at one of the tables reserved for Gabe's family. I had spent so much time wondering why he never called after our amazing night together until I finally realized that I shouldn't have trusted him. That all that stuff about me being only his had been said in the heat of the moment. I'd gone from the emotional high of thinking that I'd found the man who would love me like my dad did my mom to the low of realizing that I'd lost my virginity during a holiday fling with a guy I'd never see again.

There had been a lot of sadness for me to process between. A ton of anger, too. But I'd pushed all those feelings deep down inside so I wouldn't ruin my best friend's wedding. Except for that time I'd gone and banged on his hotel room door, yelling and screaming like a woman scorned. Which seemed apt since that was exactly what I was.

And now he was sitting right in front of me, glaring at me as though I was the one who'd wronged him. I wanted nothing more than to fly off the handle, but I couldn't do that without embarrassing Avery...who was already darting a worried glance at me. When she circled her hand over her lap where nobody else could see it, I finally realized that I'd stopped talking when I noticed Lennox.

Pulling myself together as best I could, I dragged my gaze away from the man I wanted to strangle and forced a soft laugh. "Sorry about that. Like I said, I'm terrible at speeches."

Avery played along, giggling and nodding her head as she mouthed, "She really is."

"But not so bad that I was going to turn down the chance to stand by my best friend's side when she married her boss." I smiled at her and winked. "Oops, I meant to say man of her dreams."

Avery rolled her eyes. "Yeah, sure you did."

I made the mistake of glancing around the room, my gaze landing on Lennox again. The rest of my speech was a bit of a blur, but I must not have done too terrible of a job because everyone clapped when I sat back down. I lifted my glass of wine to take a sip, hoping it would calm my nerves. Instead, my hands trembled so hard that I spilled some on my dress. At least it was the perfect excuse to head to the bathroom, where I would have some privacy while I pulled myself together.

Leaning toward Avery as I pointed at my lap, I whispered, "I better go clean this up before the stain sets in."

"I know you were really nervous about giving a speech, but you did a great job." She gave my hand a quick squeeze. "Thanks for being the best friend a girl could ask for."

"Right back at you."

My legs were shaky as I walked away from the table, heading straight for the nearest exit before I gave in to the urge to confront Lennox. When I made it to the bathroom and the door shut behind me, I let out a shaky sigh as tears filled my eyes. I tended to be an angry crier, but I had a feeling this time it was more because I was upset over how things had gone between Lennox and me.

As I was reaching for a tissue from the container next to the sink, my head jerked up at the sound of the door crashing against the wall. Lennox stormed into the bathroom, his blue eyes practically spitting fire at me. Lifting my arm, I put my hand up and hissed, "Leave me alone, Lennox. I don't want to talk to you right now."

"Right now? Or ever?" he growled, a muscle jumping in his jaw.

His question sounded an awful lot like an accusation, which made me even more furious with him than I'd already been. "Really? What in the world do you have to be angry about? I'm the one who has the right to be mad. Not you."

"Angry doesn't begin to cut it." I took several steps backward as he stalked toward me, until my back was against one of the stalls. "I moved past that emotion days ago."

Straightening my spine, I poked a finger against his muscular chest. "I'm sure that's not the only thing you moved past this week."

His brows drew together. "I have no fucking clue what you're talking about."

"If you only wanted one night with me, you should have just said that instead of getting my hopes up for more," I accused, fighting hard to hold my tears back. I could cry later, where Lennox couldn't see how much he'd hurt me. "And you definitely should've used a condom. It's irresponsible to go around having unprotected sex with women who you never plan to call again. If that's what you do all the time, you could have dozens of kids out there that you don't know about."

The thought of him having sex with someone else made me want to vomit, let alone without a condom. And fathering a child with another woman.

But my accusation seemed to have taken the wind out of his sails. The anger in his blue orbs was replaced by confusion. "How in the fuck was I supposed to call you, Brielle?"

I shook my head, trying to make sense of his question. "What?"

"I've never gone bare before. Just with you, baby." He cupped my cheeks with his palms. "I never would've done that if I hadn't intended for us to be forever."

"Forever?" I echoed softly, my eyes widening as butterflies swirled in my belly.

"Why do you think I was so pissed when I woke up and didn't find a single trace of you in my room except for the stain of our mixed releases and the blood from your virginity on my sheets?" He slid one of his hands down my back to pull me close. "I've been going out of my mind these past four days. I didn't even let them come in to clean the room because then I'd have nothing left of you."

"But I left you a note."

"I don't know what happened, but I didn't see your note." A groan rumbled up his chest as he shook his head. "It was as though you disappeared into thin air."

"Oh, no," I cried, sad over all the time we'd lost because I hadn't woken him up before I left. "I'm so sorry."

"Let's go up to my room and talk about what happened, baby."

"I can't." My gaze darted toward the door as I wondered how soon I'd be missed. "I need to get back. It's a rehearsal dinner, and

I'm the maid of honor. I can't just disappear like this."

"The fuck you can't," he growled, tossing me over his shoulder before storming out of the bathroom.

Avery was wrong...I was the worst best friend in the world. I should have insisted that Lennox put me down so I could return to the banquet room. But instead, I latched onto the excuse that I was carried away—literally—and let him take me up to his room without saying a peep. And when he tossed me on the bed, I got to my knees and helped him remove his jacket, tie, and shirt as I whispered, "Hurry, I need you. It's been too long. So much wasted time over a misunderstanding."

Lennox quickly undid his belt while he kicked his shoes off. He'd already shoved his pants down his legs by the time I got the straps on my heels undone. Climbing on the bed behind me, he rasped, "Let me."

My dress was new, but I didn't complain when he ripped the zipper open and tore the silky material from my body. Nothing mattered beyond feeding my need for him.

He undid the clasp on my bra with a deft twist of his fingers, goose bumps popping up along my skin as he slid the straps down my shoulders. When he brushed his lips against the back of my neck, I shuddered. "I love the feel of your lips on my skin."

"You're gonna love this even more," Lennox murmured, guiding me down with my back against the mattress. Then he tugged my panties down my legs and settled between my thighs. When he sucked hard on one of my nipples, I felt the tug of his lips deep in my core.

Pressing the pads of my fingers against the back of his head, I pulled him close. "You're right. That is better."

"You haven't seen anything yet." Switching sides, he gave my other breast the same attention before kissing his way down my body. When he circled my belly button with his tongue, I let out a little whimper and writhed beneath him until his hands came to my hips to hold me in place. "Be a good girl and let me play with your body. It's been too long since I've gotten to taste you."

My inner walls spasmed at his command, and I stopped moving as my breath caught in my throat. All I could do was stare down at Lennox as he used his thumbs to spread my lower lips so he could devour me with his mouth. He drove me close to the edge before

backing off, and while his tongue circled my clit, he worked a couple of fingers into my tight channel until I was begging him to let me come. "Please, Lennox. I'm so close."

His blue gaze locked on my face, and he growled, "You ever gonna leave me again?"

I shook my head frantically. "No. Never," I swore.

"You better not, baby." He nipped at my inner thigh. "But even if you did, I'd hunt you down and bring you back to where you belong. With me."

"I never wanted to leave you in the first place," I promised.

"Good," he grunted before returning his attention to my pussy... and making me come. Over and over again.

By the time he lifted his head again, I'd had three mind-blowing orgasms and wasn't sure I could take anymore. But then Lennox got to his knees and wrapped my legs around his waist. With his hands under my butt cheeks, he lifted me so he could drive his cock deep inside with one powerful thrust. All of my doubts were wiped away as I cried out in ecstasy.

His need for me was as urgent as mine was for him, and our passion quickly spiraled out of control. Lennox pounded in and out of me, hard and fast. It didn't take long for him to bring me to the edge again, and when my pussy clenched around his hard shaft, I took him with me. "Fuck! Brielle! Fuck, yes!"

I was a boneless heap of satisfaction, but that didn't stop Lennox from taking me again less than an hour later. And a couple more times through the night. I assumed that the days we had spent apart had made him insatiable...but he insisted he'd always be that way when it came to me.

Chapter Eight

LENNOX

"YOU HAVE TO LET ME GO," BRIELLE SIGHED.

My arms tightened around her, plastering our naked bodies together. "Never," I growled.

"I love hearing that, but I meant for today. I have a ton of stuff to do before I meet the girls to get ready."

The wedding. Right.

"On one condition," I conceded.

Brielle giggled. "What's that?"

"You shower with me before you go."

She looked up at me through her lashes, her lips curved in a cute little smirk. "If I must," she said with a dramatic sigh.

I slapped her ass, then jumped out of bed before picking her up and tossing her over my shoulder. After thoroughly dirtying her up—twice—I washed us both, then we began to get ready for the day.

Once she was dressed, Brielle grabbed her phone, and her pretty mouth curled into a frown. I hoped Avery hadn't called to give her a hard time over disappearing last night. I didn't want to be a wedge between them, but my control had snapped, and I hadn't been capable of waiting.

I was about to ask when she put her phone to her ear. A male voice started speaking and irrational jealousy burned in my chest. I would always be possessive over Brie, but my emotions were still raw from the past few days.

I stalked over to her, intending to take the phone and order whoever the fuck he was to forget my woman existed. But I paused in front of her when she lifted her head and watched me with

amusement sparkling in her eyes. Then she pulled the phone away and tapped the screen, ending what I suddenly realized had been a voicemail.

"That was my Uncle Jonah," she said with a smirk.

Ahhhh. Now I understood. At least she was amused and not freaking out over how far I'd gone to find her.

"He wanted to warn me that you were searching for me. But he also said I could trust you and that you're a lot like my dad."

She beamed, and I sent a silent thank you to my friend. Nothing would convince Brielle to be with me more than knowing I would love her the way her dad loved her mom.

Her cheeks turned pink, and she stepped close, locking her arms around my neck. "Maybe I shouldn't, but I find it kinda hot that you went to such lengths to look for me."

"And now that I've found you, I will never let you go."

"Good." Her expression was jubilant, and she looked so gorgeous. I knew if I didn't let her go quickly, we'd be right back in that bed again.

"Go," I growled as I turned her around toward the door and gave her sexy ass a light swat. "While I'm still able to let you."

She blew me a kiss over her shoulder right before she waltzed out the door, and I chuckled. "So fucking adorable."

A soft breeze ruffled my hair as I walked down to the beach where they'd set up for the wedding ceremony. Everything looked beautiful, and I wondered if this was something Brielle would like for our wedding.

Damn, I'd missed my woman all day, and I couldn't wait to see her.

My sister waved at me, and I smiled in greeting as I sat down next to her.

"Gabe tells me you're next," she whispered.

I rolled my eyes, then glared at my nephew, who was waiting up at the altar for his bride. "Your son has a big mouth." It seemed Gabe had guessed what we were discussing because he grinned unrepentantly at me.

Amy laughed. "I think he was trying to divert my attention away from when he's going to make me a grandmother."

Soft music began to play, bringing all conversation to a halt.

One by one, the bridesmaids traversed the aisle and took their places at the front. When it was Brielle's turn, everything around me faded away. She was all I could see. Wild blond curls, gorgeous blue eyes, sexy lips, and mouthwatering curves were accentuated by her flowing pink dress with spaghetti straps. I had a moment of irritation when she walked past and I noticed the almost completely open back. A sash thing tied in a bow across the middle, but the skirt seemed like it was barely hanging on to her delectable ass. However, we'd discuss that later after I ripped the dress off her and threw it away.

When Brielle reached her spot, her gaze strayed to the area where I was seated. Our eyes met, and I saw everything I imagined she could see in mine. She beamed at me, and I was so lost in her that I barely noticed the ceremony had begun.

When Brielle reached out to take Avery's bouquet, the movement broke my trance and I finally focused on the bride and groom. As they spoke their vows, I pictured Brielle and myself in their place. I glanced back at my girl, and her dreamy expression as she listened to their promises of love had warmth blooming in my chest. Then she looked at me, and I knew I wouldn't be able to wait to make her officially mine.

If Brielle wanted a big wedding, I would make sure it happened. But we'd already be man and wife.

She really was perfect for me, and I wanted her tied to me in every way as soon as possible.

The rest of the wedding was a bit of a blur, but I went through the motions. As the bridal party walked back down the aisle, I glared at Rhys, who was holding Brielle's elbow. However, he didn't notice because he was staring at Emma with a determined expression that I knew all too well.

Finally, the crowd began to disperse, and I gave my sister a hug and a kiss while promising to see her at the reception.

Then I swiftly found a quiet corner and pulled my phone from my pocket.

"Ivy," I said to my assistant as soon as she picked up. "I need my jet fueled and ready to fly to Las Vegas in a few hours. Book the

penthouse at The Lennox and make a reservation in their wedding chapel for tomorrow. Get their most expensive package. Also, set up an account in their bridal boutique. I'll let Drew know you'll be calling."

If Ivy was shocked by my requests, she kept her thoughts to herself. She just asked a few clarifying questions before hanging up.

Then I shot off a text to my friend Drew Lennox, the owner of The Lennox Hotel and Casino, and received a response that he would make sure it all happened.

Satisfied that Brielle would officially be mine in less than twenty-four hours, I headed to the reception to dance with my gorgeous bombshell.

Chapter Nine

BRIELLE

"YOU GOT ME IN TROUBLE WITH THE BRIDE," I CHIDED AS LENNOX AND I swayed back and forth in the middle of the dance floor. Avery hadn't really given me that hard of a time, but I needed to do something to distract myself from my desire for him, or else I'd never keep the promise I'd made to her when we were getting ready for the ceremony. I couldn't leave the reception until she and Gabe did, no matter how much I wanted to drag Lennox up to his room. Or mine. Or anywhere we'd have enough privacy for us to do all the dirty things I'd been fantasizing about for the past few hours.

His breath was hot against my ear as he asked, "How did I manage to do that?"

"I disappeared without a word in the middle of her rehearsal dinner."

One of his hands drifted down to cup my butt as he smirked down at me. "I'm sorry your friend was pissed at you, baby. But nothing will make me regret doing whatever it took to get you to myself. Ever."

My arms were twined around his neck, and I lifted one of my hands to cup his cheek. "I don't regret it, either. And once I explained what happened, Avery understood. She was too busy jumping up and down and squealing in excitement to be mad at me anymore. The hair stylist literally had to force her to sit back down so she could finish her updo."

"Good." He turned his head to press a kiss against my palm, sending a shiver down my spine. "If she hadn't been cool about us

as a couple, that would've made family get-togethers with my sister and her family awkward as fuck."

I tilted my head to the side, unsure what he meant by that. "How come?"

"I love my nephew, but I would never be okay with anyone making you uncomfortable," he explained, pulling me closer. "If Avery said something shitty to you, I'd be too angry to care that she's his wife. Then I'd say something to her that would only piss off Gabe."

The way he got all fired up on my behalf—over something that would never even happen—was sweet. And incredibly sexy. "There's one tiny flaw in your logic."

"What's that?" he asked.

I quirked a brow. "Why would I be there?"

He shook his head with a deep chuckle. "Of course you'd be there. Everyone comes to those things."

I didn't understand why he was acting as though it was a forgone conclusion. "But I live in Miami. And Avery is the one who married into your family today. Not me."

"You will be soon."

I almost tripped over his feet at the utter certainty in his tone. "I will what? Not live in Miami anymore? Or be married into your family?"

"Both." Lennox didn't seem to care that we'd come to a stop in the middle of the dance floor while everyone else continued to move around us. His piercing blue eyes burned into mine as he growled, "Those four days without you drove home what I already knew the day we met. You're the only woman for me, Brielle."

"I am?" I whispered, happy tears streaming down my cheeks.

"Abso-fucking-lutely," he growled, crashing his mouth against mine for a passionate kiss that left me breathless and dizzy with desire. "I love you, baby."

My heart filled with joy. "I love you, too. So much."

"You better because I'm never letting you go." He slipped his hand between us to cup my belly. "I want my ring on your finger and your belly swollen with my baby, sooner rather than later."

If I'd had any lingering doubts about his intentions toward me, his declaration would have wiped them away. But he'd already spent last night convincing me that we were much more than a

holiday fling. Between all the mind-blowing orgasms he gave me while refusing to wear a condom because he badly wanted to knock me up—and the fact that he'd reached out to Jonah to try to track me down—I knew that Lennox planned to be with me forever.

But hearing him tell me those three little words and being able to say them back made an already incredible night even better. “I want that, too.”

I wondered about the odd glint in his blue orbs at my admission, but I didn't get a chance to ask about it. I was so absorbed in Lennox that I didn't notice Avery had come up behind me until she tapped me on the shoulder and said, “You're off the hook.”

My brows drew together. “Pardon?”

She grinned at me. “Your promise has been fulfilled. Gabe and I are saying our goodbyes so we can head up to the honeymoon suite. You don't need to stick around anymore. Go upstairs with your Prince Charming and enjoy your own fairy-tale ending.”

“Perfect timing.” I threw my arms around my best friend for a quick hug. “Congratulations.”

“You, too.” She beamed me a soft smile before pointing her finger at Lennox. “You better take good care of her, or else you'll have to answer to me.”

“You have nothing to worry about in that regard,” he assured her, sliding his arm around my back to pull me against his side. “I will always do whatever it takes to make Brielle happy.”

I leaned into Lennox with a dreamy sigh as Avery left us to walk over to her parents. But before I could get too comfortable, he tugged me toward the hotel.

When he led me through the back door and headed in the opposite direction of the elevator that would take us up to his room, I asked, “Where are we going?”

With a determined gleam in his eyes, he declared, “I'm not waiting to make you mine.”

“I'm pretty sure you already did that.” I gave a delicate shudder at the memories of how he'd done it. “Quite thoroughly.”

He stroked his thumb over my ring finger. “I have my plane ready. We're going to Vegas.”

“Vegas? Now?”

“Need to give you my last name, Brielle. Right now.”

Dragging me across the country to get married was a total caveman move...and I couldn't love it more. His sense of urgency was a sign of how much he loved me, just like I'd always wanted from the man I'd eventually marry. "Yes, let's do it!"

"I wasn't actually asking, baby." Guiding me out the door to the car waiting for us, he flashed me a smile of pure male satisfaction. "But I'm glad you're on board with the plan."

"Maybe I should've kept my agreement to myself." I giggled and shook my head. "Then you would have needed to toss me over your shoulder to get me on the plane."

He palmed my butt as he helped me into the car's back seat, giving my cheek a little squeeze before he climbed in after me. "Don't worry, baby. I'll toss you over my shoulder and carry you up to our room after we're pronounced man and wife."

Curious about the football players on the team Lennox owns, the New York Nighthawks? Grab [Sacked](#) for the star quarterback's story! Or [Two to Tango](#) for one of the wide receivers!

Jonah Carrington also has a book—[First Love](#)!

Fiona Davenport Books and Bio

The writing duo of Elle Christensen and Rochelle Paige team up under the Fiona Davenport pen name to bring you sexy, insta-love stories filled with alpha males. If you want a quick & dirty read with a guaranteed happily ever after, then give Fiona Davenport a try!

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Rhys & Emma

ELLE CHRISTENSEN

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Chapter One

EMMA

“PERFECT.” I SMILED BRIGHTLY AT THE FLORIST AND CHECKED ONE MORE thing off my list. The flower arrangements were exactly what Avery wanted. “I’ll see you Saturday morning to set up for the rehearsal dinner.”

“Do you ever take a break?”

I turned around to see Sebastian Brant, the hotel manager, leaning against the doorjamb with his hands tucked into the pockets of what was probably a three-thousand-dollar suit.

“You’re one to talk,” I scoffed. I’d known the man for a year, ever since Avery, one of my best friends, asked me to plan her wedding at this resort. In all that time, I’d never seen Sebastian take more than an afternoon off. Admittedly, I rarely had the opportunity to relax. I had a thriving business as one of New York City’s top wedding planners, and I was a perfectionist who found it hard to share my responsibilities.

I cocked my head to the side and grinned. “Yes, nosy, I will be taking time to enjoy myself while I’m here. I plan on drinking my weight in cocktails at the bachelorette party on Tuesday.”

Sebastian grinned. “Does this mean I’ll get to see the real Emma?”

I winked at him, and my lips curled up into a smirk. “If you’re lucky.”

Since I’d arrived at the resort two days ago, I’d been in work mode from the moment I woke up to the moment I collapsed into bed. Which meant I wore sleek pantsuits or pressed blouses and a pencil skirt. A wardrobe that screamed professional. My long black

hair was usually twisted into a chignon, and my makeup was subtle. The only indulgence I allowed was my addiction to fabulous shoes. Like the sky-high, peep-toe stilettos I was wearing. They were cream, with black detailing that made them look like a slutty wingback shoe. They were seriously fabulous.

However, I had more eccentricities than my shoe collection when I wasn't in wedding planner mode. There were dark purple streaks in my hair, easily hidden when it was twisted at the back of my head. I wore a small silver hoop in my right eyebrow, a diamond micro-stud in my left nostril, and rows of piercings up each ear. I also had a tiny silver football that dangled in my belly button—in honor of my twin brother, Miles, a starting wide receiver with the Phoenix Dragons—and a bejeweled barbell in my tongue, which I switched to clear when working. My clothes were also bright and funky, very “rocker chick,” according to Miles. I liked to tell people I would have been a groupie if I hadn't become a wedding planner. Something that drove my buttoned-up stepbrother, Rhys, crazy.

I said goodbye to Sebastian and headed to my next meeting. It was early evening by the time I was done and returned to my room. Most of the bridal party had arrived yesterday and today, but my brother was running a day late. Since we'd planned to have dinner, I was without company for the evening.

Gabe and Avery were having dinner with his Uncle Lennox. Brielle—the maid of honor and a close friend—had disappeared. Then I remembered my childhood friend—and Avery's cousin—Sadie's room was only a few doors down from mine. She'd been down on her luck lately, especially with her grandmother passing away. Getting her here for the wedding hadn't been easy, especially since he hadn't left our hometown of Clover Springs since before we graduated high school. I was willing to bet that getting her out of her room for a drink with me would probably do her some good.

I stripped off my work clothes and tossed “Emma the Professional” in the closet.

After a long, hot shower, I dried my hair and let it hang long and straight around me. I switched out my nude underwear for pink lace and put on a black top with the name of my favorite band emblazoned on the front in pink glitter which showed a sliver of my stomach, so my piercing was visible. The top was slightly sheer, hence the bright, pretty bra. After donning a pair of skinny jeans that

had rips everywhere patched with lace, I zipped up a pair of peep-toe, black ankle boots with sparkly black bows up the front and a translucent, glittery pink heel.

Some chunky jewelry, slightly bolder makeup, a wristlet with my credit card and ID, and I was ready to go. I grabbed another sparkly top at the last minute and made my way to Sadie's door.

She answered after two knocks, and my heart squeezed at the tired, bleak look in her eyes. When she realized it was me, some of her weariness faded, replaced by a welcoming sparkle. "Emma! It's so great to see you!"

I threw my arms around her for a hug. "You too, Sadie!" When I pulled back, I kept a hand on her arm and said solemnly, "I'm so sorry about your grandmother."

The bleakness crept back into her expression, and I wanted to kick myself for bringing it up. But I hadn't wanted to seem uncaring by not giving her my condolences.

"Thanks. It's been tough."

I shoved the sparkly top into her hands and grinned. "Which is why you need a little fun. Come on, let's hit the hotel bar for a drink. My treat!"

Sadie held up the top and shook her head, giggling. "I am *not* wearing this, Emmy."

I glared at her for calling me that detested nickname and pretended to pout. "But—"

"I'll join you for a drink, but no sparkles."

"I'll take it!" I laughed and did a little twirl. "I'll be crazy enough for the both of us."

Chapter Two

RHYS

I WAS SO TIRED, I FELT LIKE I HAD SAND IN MY EYES, MAKING MY VISION a little blurry. I barely noticed the soft, beachy atmosphere around me. It would probably relax me once I didn't feel like a walking zombie.

Gabe walked up to the counter and slapped me on the back. "Glad you made it," he said, a little too cheerily, in my opinion.

I scowled at him as I handed the clerk my credit card. "If you weren't like a brother to me, and I hadn't watched Avery grow up, I would boycott your wedding for picking a date in June—even if I am the best man."

It was a sentimental thing since Gabe proposed at this resort last June. However, it was also the month that one of our biggest clients launched their new brand of whiskey. The advertising company that Gabe and I owned—CM Creative Agency—had offices in Miami and New York City, but we had accounts all over the world. Which was why I'd spent the last couple of weeks in Scotland, where Mulligan & Co was based.

"How was Glasgow?"

Our client, Cameron MacKay, had launched their new product, Mulligan Whiskey, last weekend, and I'd been there to deal with any snags.

"Everything went smoothly on the backend, and Cameron was extremely pleased." So much so that he'd wanted to discuss his next advertising campaign.

Gabe scratched his chin and eyed me curiously. "I was surprised you agreed to stay a few extra days."

I shrugged nonchalantly. "I figured it couldn't hurt to get a jump on the developmental planning." Rubbing my forehead, I sighed. "But then he dragged my ass to a party last night. I finally escaped around midnight and woke up early for a breakfast meeting with Elizabeth James." She owned a fashion magazine that circulated heavily in the UK and most of Europe. We'd built a strong relationship with her and several contracts for placement. "I finally flew out on the seven o'clock." I glanced at my watch. It was almost ten P.M. in Florida, but it felt like three in the morning.

"Need anything?" Gabe asked, and I shook my head.

The clerk handed me my card and a key, then signaled for a bellman to collect my luggage and take it to my room. I handed him a generous tip before turning back to Gabe. "I'm going to my room to pass out and hopefully beat some of this jetlag."

"Of course," he replied with a smile. "Thanks for holding down the fort while Avery and I finished up our wedding plans the last couple of months."

I shrugged off his gratitude. It was what friends and business partners did. We shook hands, slapping each other's backs—as men do. Then he walked toward a glass wall that was open, leading out to a beautiful patio and pool area.

Exhausted, I trudged toward the elevator, but I spotted the bar on the way and considered stopping in for a small glass of scotch to help me sleep. But I was too damn tired to—*what the fuck?*

Suddenly, my vision cleared, my fuzzy brain became alert, and my cock sprang to life—an unwelcome reaction to the woman currently downing a shot at the bar.

My eyes were glued to Emmaline Hensley, my stepsister. I didn't think of her that way. I hadn't since I came home for a visit right before moving to New York.

She was eighteen and had just graduated from high school. It was the first time I'd looked at her since she was a kid. Our personalities had always clashed, so we'd never gotten along. Then suddenly, she wasn't my annoying little stepsister... She was a sexy woman with mouthwatering curves and a mouth made for sin. I gave her shit about the barbell in her tongue, but it was mostly to cover up that I found it fucking sexy.

The sparks between us morphed into a fiery attraction that was unwelcome and became my dirty little secret. From that moment

forward, my frustration at the situation and my repressed sexual desire drove me to act like an asshole whenever she was around. To be fair, she seemed to revel in pushing my buttons.

When she'd gone to college in NYC, our parents had expected me to look out for her. Which I did, from afar. However, we did our damndest to avoid each other, which wasn't always possible since my father was married to her mother, and her twin, Miles, was my best friend.

She was twenty-six now, and she'd only become more beautiful. My eyes swept over her, taking in her flamboyant, albeit incredibly sexy outfit, bold make-up, piercings, and the purple streaks in her hair. All reminders of why we were completely wrong for each other.

While Emmaline—I admit, I called her that because it pissed her off—was blasting rock music, constantly getting into minor trouble, and the life of the party, I was studying, writing speeches, and creating a ten-year plan.

Emma hadn't grown out of her "rocker" stage like I expected, and I'd been surprised when her business had become the "go-to" for the rich and famous. Not because she wasn't extremely talented—I'd seen plenty of pictures of weddings she'd planned, and they were nothing short of amazing—but her style didn't exactly scream business professional.

My mouth tipped down into a frown when I realized how much skin her outfit bared. A possessive need to stalk over to her and throw my jacket around her shoulders hit me hard. My rational brain lectured the part of me that wanted to rip off her clothes and bury my cock deep inside her, but it wasn't listening.

Fucking hell. I glanced around before discreetly adjusting myself to hide my hard-on. After taking a deep, cleansing breath, I'd convinced myself to leave when a young, good-looking guy in board shorts and an open Hawaiian shirt—showing off a ripped stomach—approached Emma.

His smile was more of a leer, and my feet started moving of their own accord. In seconds, I was smoothly stepping between Emma and the prick. I shot him a warning scowl before turning to my woman—um, stepsister.

"Hey, baby, I'm sorry I'm late," I said smoothly, dropping a kiss on the top of her head.

Emma's eyes widened, and her jaw went slack. Another man began to walk toward us, and I slipped my arm around her waist to warn them off. I inhaled, trying to calm myself, but my lungs filled with her delicious scent. *Cinnamon and vanilla*. It made me so fucking hungry.

"What are you—" She turned her head to see what I was scowling at and when she realized what I'd done, her expression darkened.

I was over half a foot taller than her five foot eight, so I had to lean down to put my lips near her ear. "Perhaps you should scamper back to your room and put on some actual clothes, Emmaline."

When I raised my head, she was glaring daggers at me. "It's *Emma*," she snapped. "And what the fuck do you think you are doing?" Her eyes narrowed. "And I'll wear whatever I damn well want, brother dear."

"Don't call me that," I growled. "You are *not* my sister."

Her shoulders sagged, and she sighed. "You're right, Rhys. I'm nothing to you."

The words hit me like a punch to the solar plexus. Is that what she thought? My first instinct was to correct her assumption...but that would only further complicate things. And I didn't know if I could hide the true depth of my desire for her.

"And if you don't want to be my big brother, stop acting like one and scaring off any guy who shows interest in me."

With that, she pushed my arm away and stalked off toward the lobby.

My hands fisted at my sides as I barely stopped myself from going after her. It didn't help that her hips swayed seductively, sending a rush of blood to my groin.

"Hey, Rhys."

Surprised to hear my name, I tore my gaze from Emma's spectacular ass. My expression softened when I saw another friend of Avery's from our hometown. "Long time no see, Sadie," I said, giving her a brief hug. "You look good."

"And you look like an idiot," she replied, her tone amused.

"Pardon?"

"I thought you would have pulled your head out of your ass by now and told her how you feel." Sadie drank the last of the green liquid in her glass while I stared at her, aghast. Then she placed the

cup on the bar and shook her head. "One day, you'll realize what you're missing, and I just hope she hasn't moved on." She cocked her head and studied me for a second. "Then again, I'm not completely sure you deserve her."

I didn't disagree. Which was why I held myself back. Didn't Sadie understand that by staying away, I had Emma's best interests at heart? If we gave into this attraction, we'd end up with broken hearts, assuming we didn't kill each other first. And it would tear our family apart.

"It was good to see you, Rhys." Sadie gave me a little wave and followed the same path Emma had taken, weaving through the tables until she reached the lobby.

I glimpsed Emma talking to a suave man in an expensive, expertly tailored suit. She laughed at whatever he said, and he placed his hand on her waist as he bent over to say something that made her chuckle in return. I immediately hated him for being on the receiving end of Emma's smiles.

They walked to the bank of elevators, and I wondered if they were going to the same room. Maybe they were together, and he was here with her?

My stomach rolled at the thought, but I pushed down the nausea and forced myself to turn around and signal to the bartender. "Let's start with a couple of shots."

Chapter Three

EMMA

"THE NERVE OF THAT ASSHOLE," I RANTED AS SEBASTIAN AND I JOINED Sadie in front of the bank of elevators. I put my hand on Sadie's shoulder. "He ruined my fun night out with you, making me the worst friend ever when I ditched you in the bar," I apologized. "I swear to make it up to you another night."

Sadie laughed. "I would have been disappointed if you hadn't stormed out."

The lift arrived, the door opened, and we all stepped inside. Sebastian hit the number for my floor—causing Sadie to raise her eyebrows at me—then the button for his own.

"Sadie, this is Sebastian Brant," I introduced him. "He's the hotel manager. Sebastian, Sadie is Avery's cousin. We all grew up in Clover Springs."

"Very nice to meet you," he said with a smile, receiving a small one in return. "So, you've met the real Emma," he teased, gesturing from my head to my toes. "I didn't think I'd get a glimpse until Tuesday. Despite how busy I am, I was so intrigued that I planned to camp out in the lobby for a peek. I've only known Emma in the professional sense and 'heard' about her personal style."

Sadie chuckled. "She's always been quite the contradiction."

"It can take some getting used to," I admitted with a smirk.

"I like it," Sebastian said, his tone approving.

Thinking about Rhys's reaction, my lips curled down. "Nice to know someone does."

Neither Sebastian nor Sadie sought clarification from my comment, probably noticing the figurative "Don't fucking go there"

sign on my forehead.

The rest of the ride was silent until I wished them goodnight and returned to my room.

I was still royally pissed at Rhys when I woke the following morning, mainly because my night had been restless. I'd dreamt about how last night could have gone if Rhys had come to meet me at the bar because he found me irresistible. He would've kissed me hello, and then we would have spent the night together. I kept hearing him call me "baby" in that low, smooth voice, and it sent a streak of desire straight to my core.

Ugh. I hated how much I wanted him. Ever since I was old enough to know what a crush was, I'd mooned after him. When I turned eighteen, I'd secretly hoped he would finally see me as a woman and want me as much as I wanted him. But he'd been even more of a jackass since then.

After showering, I dressed in a dark, berry-colored blouse with a cream skirt and jacket. I applied subtle makeup, and put half of my hair in a twist at the back of my head.

Once I removed my piercings, the only remnants of my natural style were the purple streaks in my hair and my fabulous shoes. The T-strap stilettos were a similar color to my blouse, but they had glittery, cream swirls in the fabric and small, sparkly, cream-colored bows on the strap and back. It was hilarious that my shoe fetish had become an unofficial trademark of my business. When new clients came to my office, their eyes immediately went to my feet. Brides often asked me to help them find their shoes when they wanted something unique.

I slipped my room key and a spare lip gloss into my pocket, picked up my clipboard, and grabbed a clothing bag from the closet as I left my room. Deciding to get the worst over with first, I went up to the penthouse floor and marched to Rhys's suite.

Rapping my knuckles on the door, I waited for a minute. I didn't hear a hint of movement, so I knocked again a little louder, then pressed the button beside the door to ring the bell.

A muffled curse had my lips tipping up at the corners. The lock disengaged, and the door whipped open, revealing a disheveled, half-naked Rhys with angry, bloodshot eyes. I knew he'd flown in from a five-hour time difference, but it looked like someone had indulged a little too much at the bar last night. *Tsk-tsk*. A moment of

immaturity flared, and I took perverse satisfaction in waking him up while he was battling a hangover and jet lag.

"Somebody better be dead," he growled, his voice raspy from sleep.

My panties were instantly drenched, and I averted my eyes from his broad shoulders, sculpted chest, and the pajama pants hanging low on his narrow hips.

I lifted my chin and pushed into the room, ignoring how my arm brushed his skin and the heat radiating through my sleeve. "Try this on," I ordered as I removed his suit from the protective bag. I spun around and held it out expectantly while my eyes scanned my clipboard.

When he didn't take it right away, I looked up to see him staring at me with a shocked expression. "Emmaline?" He double blinked, then blinked again, trying to make sure what he was seeing was real.

I frowned, annoyed at his insistence on calling me by my first name. "*Emma*," I enunciated. "Is it really so hard for you to remember that?"

One corner of his mouth kicked up. "Maybe I like it when you get all riled up."

Choosing not to engage in whatever game he was playing, I raised a brow and shook the hangar. "I don't have all day, Rhys. Try this on, and I need to know how long your speech is. You are excellent at pontificating, so you'll have to cut it if it's too long. I—"

"What the hell are you wearing?" he blurted, cutting me off.

I frowned and tossed the suit at him, forcing him to catch it so it wouldn't crumple on the ground. I put my free hand on my hip and huffed, "You didn't like my bright, revealing clothes last night. You don't like my professional, muted suit that covers everything. Not that it matters, but what would you approve of me wearing?"

"Nothing," he muttered.

It was so low I almost missed it, and I was stunned speechless for a moment. I wasn't sure if he meant it as a dismissal or if he wanted to see me naked. I decided I didn't want to know because if it was the latter, I might burst into flames and try to climb him like a tree.

I took a deep breath, continuing as if he hadn't spoken. "Anyway, I have more to do today than babysit your grumpy ass, so try that on and show me your speech. Then you can return to your bed and

dream of your perfect woman in her granny panties and flannel nightgown faking an orgasm from your tiny dick.”

The words were out of my mouth before I could think, and though I kept my expression neutral, I winced internally. That might have been going a little far... And why the fuck had I brought up his dick? It was hard enough—no pun intended—to keep from picturing him naked whenever I saw him... and now... I wanted to know how light of a tug it would take to make those pants drop to the floor.

For the love of all that is holy, will you get a grip?

Instead of getting angry as I’d suspected he would, Rhys’s lips twitched and curved up into a smirk. As he turned to walk to the bedroom, he drawled, “If that’s your way of asking to measure my cock, you’re more than welcome.” He paused and turned his head so his steel-gray eyes landed on me, and I shivered from the intensity of the sexual promise in them. “Trust me, baby. If we fucked, you’d be too busy begging to come with my big cock in your tight little pussy. And when I finally made you come, no way in hell would you be faking it.”

He disappeared into the bedroom, leaving me standing in the middle of the living room wearing ruined panties and shaking with need. Rhys had never spoken to me like that. I was pretty fucking shocked that such dirty words had come from his mouth. He’d knocked me off balance, and I *hated* that.

I wanted to bolt, but I didn’t want him to see that I was flustered if his goal had been to throw me off my game—because he couldn’t possibly have been suggesting we should have sex, right? My feet moved swiftly to the little kitchen, and I filled a glass with cold water, then gulped it down.

“Feeling hot, Emmaline?” Rhys purred, causing another shiver to race down my spine and a tingle between my legs.

“It’s Florida in June,” I snapped. “What do you think?”

“Don’t ask questions you don’t want an answer to, baby,” he said with a smug smile that I wanted to smack off his face... before I ran away.

What the hell is he doing? Why is he talking like this?

Answering him seemed to continually get me in trouble, so I changed the subject, putting my focus back on my job. I checked the fit of his suit, then gave him the okay to take it off while I checked it off my list.

While he was changing, I called out, "Can I see your speech?"

"About that..." His voice trailed off.

I took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of my nose. "Please don't tell me it's not finished."

The bedroom door opened, and he swaggered out, once again in the sexy pajama pants. "Okay, I won't tell you that. I'll tell you I haven't started it yet."

My mouth opened and closed like a fish while I searched for a reply. "You haven't..." I choked, feeling like my head might explode any second.

I was a perfectionist, sure, but I wasn't usually so stressed over a wedding. However, this was our friends getting married, so *this* wedding had to be perfect.

Rhys's brow furrowed. "Take a breath, Emmaline. I'll have it done before the rehearsal dinner."

"Tonight," I demanded when I got my composure back. "I'll check in with you later."

I hurried from the room before he could say another word, or I threw myself at him and begged him to prove I wouldn't fake it.

"And it's Emma!" I shouted before I slammed the door.

I spent the day working like a mad woman until my brother finally arrived that night and forced me to take a break and have dinner with him. He lured me in with the promise of pictures from two weddings where he'd recently been a groomsman. Miles knew me better than anyone and had played me like a fiddle. I couldn't resist picking them apart.

Later that night, I stopped by Rhys's room to ask about the speech, but he wasn't there. He didn't answer my text either. Was he out with another woman? The fact that I cared irritated the hell out of me.

My mind was preoccupied when I slipped into a car with Avery, Brielle, and Ruby—who grew up with Avery and me. Ruby and I both lived in New York City, so we met up from time to time. She was an accountant with a big firm and worked more than I did—which was saying a lot. I was trying to push anything to do with Rhys out of my mind, so I focused on my friend and that's when I noticed she was oddly quiet.

Since I was sitting next to her, I bumped my shoulder against hers. "Haven't had lunch in a while, Rubs. How's work?"

She turned her head and blinked at me as if she'd just realized I was there. "What? Oh, um, fine."

"Anything new going on?" I desperately wanted her to tell me all about her life so I didn't have to think about mine.

Ruby shook her head, and her eyes strayed back to the window. "No."

I put my hand on her arm and waited for her to look at me again. "Is everything alright?"

Her head bobbed, and she mumbled, "Yep. Fine."

I didn't believe her. She looked frustrated and a little defeated, but there was something else in her gaze that made me wonder if I should back off. Maybe if I changed the subject to something...

"Hey! Did you see Austin is here for the wedding?"

Ruby had always had a big crush on Austin McCoy. He had a ranch in the next town over, Whiskey Valley. I couldn't blame her. They could have put his picture under "hot cowboy" in the dictionary. Something had happened between them right before we left for college in New York, but I'd never been able to get the full story out of her.

It would probably be a trip for them to see each other again. *Or not.*

The color drained from Ruby's face, and her eyes widened like a deer caught in headlights.

"Who needs a drink?" I shouted.

Avery and Brielle whooped, but I was mostly relieved to see Ruby's color come back.

She exhaled and said, "Definitely me."

I shared a look with Avery, who was squished between Brielle and me. She caught the exchange between Ruby and me, and I raised a brow, wondering if she knew the story.

"Only some of it," she whispered.

"Hmmm." Eventually, I was determined to convince Ruby to tell me everything

Chapter Four

RHYS

I DRAINED THE REST OF THE SCOTCH IN MY GLASS AND WAS contemplating another when Gabe snapped his fingers in front of my face.

"What the fuck?" I grunted, glaring at him.

"Rhys? Did you hear a single word I've said?"

Thinking for a moment, I tried to recall... I hadn't noticed him sit down beside me. "Sorry, my mind was somewhere else."

"Clearly."

He watched me with assessing eyes as if he could see inside my head. But even knowing me as well as he did, he couldn't possibly guess that I was hung up on thoughts of Emma and what she was—or wasn't—wearing to the bachelorette party.

"Or was it *someone* else?"

Okay, maybe he could.

"What?" I played dumb.

"Only one person puts that look on your face," Gabe quipped before taking a sip of his whiskey on the rocks.

My frown deepened and I shook my head. "You're seeing things, my friend. Go bug Hunter and Miles. They're the ones who seem to be tied in knots."

Gabe gestured to a couple of empty chairs. "Apparently not, since they've already left to go find their women—although, I'm not sure Miles has figured out she's his yet."

Obviously, I'd been lost in my thoughts for a while because I hadn't noticed our brothers had ducked out early. The bachelor

party was in full swing. The event room I'd rented for the party had been transformed into a gentlemen's club—without the strippers.

There was a bar on the only wall that wasn't floor-to-ceiling windows, a buffet, clusters of comfy chairs and end tables for conversation, and poker tables. Along with drinks, the servers also carried a selection of cigars.

I'd arrived early to make sure everything was set up and ready. But I should have known better than to worry about it. Emma and I had exchanged a few emails about what I'd envisioned for Gabe's bachelor party, and she'd captured it perfectly.

Once again, I'd been stunned by her appearance. Then I heard her speaking to the staff, charismatic, eloquent, and all business, but still approachable. They clearly liked and respected her.

If it hadn't been for the glimpses of dark purple that shimmered under the lights, I might have wondered if I'd mistaken her for someone else.

"Did you see what she was wearing today?" I asked, giving up the pretense.

"Sure. I've seen her become 'Professional Emma,' as she refers to herself." Gabe chuckled and leaned back in his seat, studying me in a way that unnerved me. "In all the years she's been working in New York, you've never encountered her second personality?"

I slowly shook my head. "We only ever saw each other when family came to town. I had no idea she could..." I wasn't sure how to phrase it without sounding like an asshole. "Why does she revert to the wild one when she isn't working?"

"Because that's who she is." Gabe's reply was immediate and matter-of-fact.

I wondered why he didn't consider that she might have changed or could change. Emma could be the image of a politician's wife. Intelligent, articulate, immaculately dressed, she was the whole package. How had I missed it all these years? I'd been so caught up in my memories of her that I hadn't stopped to take in the woman she'd become. Then again, it was hard to see past the badass image she projected with her sassy mouth and rocker chick style. It was sexy as fuck.

"The professional is a part of her, but at her core, she's still the bright, enigmatic life of the party that draws in everyone around her," Gabe continued, drawing me from my thoughts. He leaned

toward me, his face a mask of seriousness. "I've always thought you two would be great together. But if you can't accept all of her, you need to walk the fuck away, Rhys."

Walk away? Now I'd seen a possibility that we were compatible?

"Rhys."

Gabe's tone was steely and gave off a spark of anger. When I met his hard gaze, his eyes bored into me with an intensity that would frighten a lesser man. "I'm not fucking around with you. If you hurt Emma, it will hurt Avery, and I'll be forced to kick your ass, or what's left of it, because you and I know I'd be in line behind Miles. So think long and hard about what you want before you decide to act."

I nodded solemnly. "I hear you," I acknowledged, accepting his threat. He and Miles would have every right to tear me apart for hurting Emma. And it was the last thing I wanted to do. But what if we could make it work? What if...?

Gabe's expression relaxed, and his attention shifted when he spotted someone walking toward us. His Uncle Lennox—they were more like brothers with only eight years between them—lifted his chin in greeting.

"I need to borrow the groom," Lennox told me with a grin.

I waved them off and headed to the bar for another drink.

When the night finally ended, I was pleasantly buzzed, making it a little easier to push Emma out of my mind. Until I headed to my room and the lift doors opened on my floor to reveal her leaning against the far wall with her eyes closed.

She was most likely coming from Avery's room—on the same floor as mine—and on her way to her own. The elevator dinged, causing her eyes to open as she pushed away from the wall and stood up straight.

I was lost in her vibrant green eyes for a moment, both of us surprised and wary. My gaze slid down her body, and anger pulsed through me while my cock hardened to the point of pain.

"Emmaline," I gritted through clenched teeth.

She didn't move, either to let me off the elevator or because she was in shock. Either way, I took advantage of her state and stalked over, took her arm in a firm grip, and walked back to the elevator. I stabbed the button for her floor, but we rode in silence while I attempted to collect myself. The tension was thick and flammable.

One spark from the chemistry between us, and we would be engulfed in the flames of our desire.

My eyes raked over her once more, and a growl rumbled in my chest. Her long hair was in a high, sleek ponytail, her makeup dark and bold, and big, glittery earrings hung from her delicate lobes.

She was dressed in an electric blue, sparkly... thing—it covered too little to be classified as a dress. The front was a halter that dipped well below her breasts. The fabric clung to her chest, looking like it might fall off at any second. The cut revealed so much of her high, round globes that I knew a small tug would uncover her puckered nipples.

The cloth barely hit her mid-thigh, and when I'd taken her arm, I'd spotted the slits on each side that went almost to the top of her hip. And when she stepped into the enclosure, the mirror behind her allowed me to see the backless style that extended to the top of her ass. The only way that dress was staying in place had to be one of those sticky bra things, and the fact that she was showing enough skin to need it had my temper rising.

Her long, long legs ended in stilettos so high they looked like they would take a fuck ton of practice to walk in. They were a dragon scale pattern with a shimmery green/blue fabric and black, see-through ribbons that went halfway up her calves, where they were tied in a bow.

She looked un-fucking-believable. Like every man's fantasy come to life. And that's what was fueling my rage... I didn't want anyone seeing her, or even picturing her, dressed like this except me. It was irrational as hell, but my good sense had deserted me the moment I saw her pouty, ruby-red mouth, and the sexy diamond-studded barbel in her tongue when she licked her lips.

"What the fuck are you wearing, Emmaline Hensley?" I snarled.

She raised an eyebrow and cocked a hip before placing her hand on it. The position opened the slit even further, and I didn't know whether I wanted to try and shut it or tear it open so I could see what kind of underwear she was wearing underneath.

"A dress, Rhys," she snapped in return. "What does it look like I'm wearing?"

"A fucking dish towel!" I barked. "You might as well be naked, Emma! Does Miles know you wore this to the bachelorette party?"

Emma's eyes narrowed. "Neither of my brothers has any say in what I choose to wear."

My control snapped, and I was suddenly crowding her up against the wall of the elevator. I stabbed the stop button before cupping her beautiful face. "I *am not* your brother, Emma," I growled. "Stop using that as an excuse to ignore what's between us." Then I crashed my mouth down over hers.

Chapter Five

EMMA

I TOUCHED MY LIPS AS I REPLAYED LAST NIGHT IN MY MIND FOR THE millionth time.

"What is going on with you?" Avery whispered from the chair next to me.

I'd arranged for anyone in the bridal party and immediate family to spend the morning at the resort spa. My facial was in ten minutes, and Avery was waiting on her masseuse, so we were relaxing in the tranquil room.

"I don't know what you mean," I replied softly.

"Yes, you do," she hissed. "I can't tell if you're mooning or brooding, but there is something on your mind."

There was an internal debate in my head, trying to determine whether I wanted to tell my friend about what happened or keep it to myself. I was twisted up inside over my encounter with Rhys and decided to confide in Avery. Besides, she knew me too well for me to hope she would give up if I played dumb.

I sighed. "Rhys bumped into me on the way to my room last night."

Her mouth dropped open for a few moments, then she sputtered, "Bumped into you as in...?"

I rolled my eyes and took a sip of my water. "As in, I was waiting for the elevator, and when it opened, there he was. Get your mind out of the gutter."

Avery laughed, but she instantly noticed that my chuckle was forced and narrowed her eyes. "Uh, uh. I'm not buying it. This

wasn't your usual bickering, was it? Did something happen? Oh! Was it the dress? I *knew* he would fold if he saw you in it!"

I bit my lip, silently conceding that I'd worn that outfit hoping I would run into Rhys. "He went ape shit over it," I told her, my cheeks heating at the memory of his response to my lack of clothing.

"Did you...?" Avery's tone was hopeful and she practically bounced in her seat, knocking the towel on her head askew.

"I told him my brothers weren't allowed to tell me what to wear, and the next thing I knew, he had me pressed against the wall while he devoured"—I gave her a look for emphasis—"and I do mean *devoured*, my mouth."

Avery squealed, then clapped her hands over her mouth, glancing around to see if she'd disturbed anyone. But we were alone, so she whipped her gaze back to me and grinned. "Holy crap, you hussy. Did you sleep with him?"

"No," I grumbled, still irritated at how the night ended. "I thought that was where it was going."

He'd ripped away my thong and palmed my ass, lifting me so I could wrap my legs around his waist. Then he'd yanked the cups of my dress to the side and gently peeled off my bra. His big hands had shaped and molded my full breasts while he'd continued to eat at my mouth. Then he'd dropped his attention to my chest and wrapped his lips around one of my nipples.

I'd cried out and ground my center against the big, hard bulge in his pants. "Fuck, Emma," he'd groaned before switching to my other breast. "I can feel how wet you are. That's it, baby, make yourself come on my cock."

His dirty words had put me right on the edge, then he bit my nipple and shoved a finger inside me, sending me soaring over the cliff and head first into the most powerful orgasm I'd ever had. I'd screamed his name, and he'd clamped his mouth over mine to swallow the sound.

When my climax had finally begun to ebb, he'd pulled back. "So fucking gorgeous," he'd rasped as his gaze drank in the sight of me. "I love the sounds you make."

I'd giggled—yes, giggled. "You'll probably have to put a pillow over my face if our parents visit because I don't think I could stay quiet."

"Things got, um, hot—really hot," I told Avery. "Afterward, I said something about staying quiet if our parents visited, and he froze." I squeezed my eyes shut and shivered. "Seriously, AV, it went from blistering to frozen tundra in seconds."

Avery stared at me like I'd grown another head.

"He didn't say another word, just calmly started the elevator again. When we reached my floor, he walked me to my door and kissed my forehead."

"Your forehead?" Avery's nose scrunched.

"Like I was his kid sister," I confirmed with a similar expression.

"Then he just left?"

I shook my head. "He said something about crossing lines, families, and personalities... I don't know. I'd tuned him out."

"I hope you shut the door in his face," Avery muttered.

This time, I grinned. "Like a pouting toddler."

We both laughed until our sides hurt. While I was still twisted up inside over Rhys, I felt lighter after telling Avery the story.

The rest of the day was last-minute checks, then I intended to take a couple of days off—mostly because Avery wouldn't stop hounding me about it until I agreed. I sent Rhys a text to ask about his speech, and when he didn't respond after a few hours, I called. He didn't pick up, and I knew I would have to drop by his room later if I wanted to make sure he'd done what I asked.

I met with Lottie—a bridesmaid and another friend from Clover Springs who had a successful blog about food and was divine at baking—about the wedding cake. Then I spent some time with Rylee—Avery's cousin, a bridesmaid, and the wedding photographer—and her assistant, who would be in charge of photos during the ceremony. I saved my worst task for last because I was a coward and didn't want to face Rhys. Or because I was afraid I'd kick him in the groin with the four-inch heels of my lavender and yellow plaid Mary Janes.

I quickly amended that to a barefoot strike to his balls. I didn't want to risk ruining my shoes.

Chapter Six

RHYS

I WAS EITHER A GOOD GUY OR THE WORLD'S BIGGEST JACKASS. I WAS leaning toward option number two.

What motherfucking idiot would walk away from the woman of his dreams when she'd just come apart in his arms like a fucking goddess? I shoved away the rest of the memory because what happened next confirmed my jackass theory.

Walking back into the hotel, I swiped a small towel over my neck. Some of us had gone to a local green to play golf this morning. I'd already been in a foul mood, but it was also hot as fuck, and I'd played like utter shit. My only success was dodging Gabe's questioning glances and attempts to talk. As soon as I'd finished playing, I went back to the hotel before the rest of the group. I was not in a sociable mood.

Once I reached my room, I showered and ordered room service. When it arrived, I sat at the table in front of my balcony to get some work done. A soft breeze made the gauzy curtains billow, and the sounds of the ocean were soothing. I had no idea how much time had passed until I was interrupted by a knock at my door.

A glance at my watch sent my eyebrows up to my hairline. It was almost seven at night, and I'd been working since just after one o'clock.

The bell rang twice, and I yelled, "I'm coming!" as I stalked across the room.

I opened the door, and my breath caught in my throat while my heart stuttered.

"Hello, Rhys," Emma clipped in a no-nonsense tone, her pretty mouth forming a frown. "I sent you a text and tried to call, but you didn't answer. "I need to get a sense for your speech..."

She continued speaking, but I was distracted by how her cream-colored pantsuit molded her curves in all the right places while still looking perfectly acceptable in a business environment. Except for her shoes. *Fuck*. Every time I saw Emma, I imagined fucking her in whatever shoes she was wearing and nothing else.

My eyes zeroed in on her mouth, and I caught a glint as she spoke. It seemed she'd forgotten to switch out the silver barbell with the clear one. Thoughts of what the piercing would feel like if she sucked me off invaded my mind, and my semi-hard shaft became a steel pipe in a split second.

"Rhys?"

Emma's tone snapped me out of my daydream, but it didn't quell the wave of lust that slammed into me.

"Fuck it," I growled. I pulled Emma—for some reason, she became Emma to me whenever I fantasized about her—into the room and backed her up against the wall, letting the door slam shut behind us.

"What are you doing?" she queried, her voice shaky and unsure. Her hands grasped my biceps and her fingers dug into the skin as she swallowed nervously.

I bent my head so our mouths were only a breath away when I rasped, "I'm done. I can't fight this anymore, baby. I'm so damn tired of pretending that I don't want you with every breath I take."

"I don't understand," she whispered.

I wanted to call bullshit, but her eyes were wary. They also burned with desire, so I told myself to tread carefully. Then her tongue darted out and licked her plush lips, making me groan and splintering my good intentions.

"I think you do understand, Emma. But let me make it perfectly clear. We aren't leaving this room until I've tasted every inch of you, feasted on your pussy, and memorized the sounds you make when I fuck you. I want to see you come apart in my arms again, but this time it will be with my cock buried deep inside you."

Emma gasped, and a shiver wracked her body. Unable to wait another second to feel her lips on mine, I kissed her. But I held back, keeping the touch no more than a whisper, leaving the next move up

to Emma. This was the moment when she would have to make the choice. Either she walked away right now, or she willingly gave herself over to the passion between us. I wouldn't make that decision for her. I didn't want her to have any regrets.

It was only a few seconds, but it felt like an eternity before she exhaled. Then she drew my bottom lip between her teeth and sucked on it while her hands delved into my hair. The last threads of my control dissolved.

Placing a hand on the walls on both sides of her head, I closed the remaining space between us. My hips bucked, pressing the large bulge in my pants into her stomach. Emma moaned, and I swept my tongue inside her mouth, savoring her flavor of cinnamon and vanilla. She tasted as amazing as she smelled.

Emma was wearing a one-piece pantsuit that somehow managed to look modest and seductive at the same time. It was long-sleeved, with a sweetheart neckline and loose pants. But it clung sensuously to her mouthwatering curves, emphasizing her full breasts, nipped-in waist, and hips that were perfectly designed for me to grasp while I helped her ride my cock.

I placed my palms on her shoulders, then down her chest, cupping her breasts and reveling in how they overflowed my hands. I gently squeezed them as my mouth glided along her jaw and down to the hollow of her throat. I felt her pulse beneath my lips, and its rapid pace had my cock throbbing in the same rhythm.

With our height difference, when I dropped to my knees, my face was directly in front of her chest. Her nipples were hard, poking into my palms, and I licked my lips in anticipation of sucking on the taut buds I'd sampled the night before.

Reluctantly, I moved my hands from her breasts to roam around, searching for—

"Side zipper," Emma gasped. "One on each." Her voice trembled with desire.

I pulled her head down for a deep kiss before focusing on removing her clothes. It was more complicated than I expected, and I couldn't help chuckling. "Is this an undercover chastity belt, baby?"

Emma laughed as she batted at my hands, and I held them up as if in surrender. She quickly slipped out of the top and it fell, pooling around her waist. "You have the most perfect breasts," I groaned, staring at the full mounds quivering with her choppy breaths. My

tongue was tingling in anticipation, so I leaned in and ran my tongue along the edge of her bra. It was made of lace, and I could see the shadows of her nipples beneath.

I licked over one hard nub, then took it into my mouth, lace and all. I sucked and laved at it, then pulled back and softly blew over the wet fabric.

"Rhys," Emma moaned as her body vibrated with need. Her knees wobbled, so I grasped her hips to help keep her upright while I gave her other breast the same treatment.

"Please," she begged after I blew across the soaked lace, chilling it so it was slightly abrasive whenever it moved against her nipple.

"What do you want, baby?" My fingers flexed in anticipation as I waited for her response.

"I want your mouth against my naked skin."

Son of a bitch. I hadn't expected how fucking hot it would be to hear her dirty talk. If she kept at it, I was going to come before I got inside her.

I deftly unhooked her bra, then yanked it away and tossed it off to the side. My breathing stalled as I got another look at her gorgeous tits. Using my hands to shape and mold them, I teased and tormented them with my mouth, nipping and licking, learning what made her squirm and moan.

Soon, though, it wasn't enough. I could practically smell how wet she was. After kissing the tip of each breast, I curled my fingers around the top of her pantsuit and dragged it down her legs along with her thong. I helped her step out of the fabric and contemplated taking off her shoes. But there had been many times when I'd fantasized about fucking Emma in nothing but a pair of her sexy shoes. I wasn't going to turn down the opportunity.

I picked up one of her feet and kissed my way from the ankle to her knee, then hooked it over my shoulder before resuming my trek up her leg. My cock nearly burst when I realized her pussy was bare, and it twitched at swollen lips, pink and glistening with her cream.

"Look how wet you are for me," I groaned. "Fucking drenched."

My hands went to her ass, and I raised her hips so she was at the perfect angle. The first lick went lightly up her seam, from bottom to top. Then I swirled my tongue around her little bundle of nerves before going back down.

"I'm already addicted," I confessed in a guttural voice.

Diving back in, I dragged my tongue up her center between her folds. Her little moan of ecstasy set my blood on fire, and I gave in to my hunger.

I feasted on Emma until she dropped her head against the wall and cried out as an orgasm slammed into her, fast and hard. I ate her through it, then lapped at her pussy, licking it clean as she descended from her high.

The knee of her supporting leg buckled, so I quickly removed the other from my shoulder, surged to my feet, and swept her into my arms. I stalked into the bedroom and tossed her onto the mattress. Her breasts bounced enticingly, and my cock threatened to rip through my pants to get to her.

"That's a lot of clothes you have on, Rhys," Emma teased as she slid the tip of her index finger down from her neck to her breast. She circled one of her nipples and scraped the pad of her digit over it, moaning and arching her back.

I was a second away from coming in my pants like a horny teenager, so I ripped off my clothes and crawled onto the bed in time to snatch her wrist before she reached her clit. "Mine," I grunted, sounding like a fucking neanderthal.

I settled between her thighs and took both her wrists in one of my big hands, raising them above her head while I hovered over her. "Tell me you want this, Emma," I demanded.

She licked her lips and breathed, "I want this. I want you, Rhys."

Something powerful surged through me, and I felt like I'd been handed the fucking world.

I leaned down and kissed her, tangling our tongues in a frantic dance as the need built inside me until I was hanging by a thread.

My cock was so hard that every moment was painful. I released her lips and raised up to rest on my knees as I stared down at my woman.

Emma's green pools were bright with passion, but when her gaze dropped to my cock, they became round as saucers and her jaw literally dropped.

"I think you better close that pretty mouth before I lose my shit and fuck it." I kept my tone even and without heat so she'd know it wasn't a threat. It was a warning.

"Are you kidding me, McKenna?" she snapped.

I glanced down and sighed. "While I'd like to assume your shock is due to the size of my cock, I'm guessing you're wondering about the piercing." Yeah, I had a barbell stuck through the head of my dick. I was drunk out of my mind when I got it eight years ago. Two days after I went home for a visit.

"You've been giving me shit over my piercings for years! Going on and on about maturity and blah blah motherfucking blah. And then you whip that out and expect to shove it inside me?"

I crossed my arms and waited for her rant to end, then I pounced. She was pinned to the bed with my body stretched out over hers and both of her wrists once again locked in one of my hands.

"That's exactly what I'm going to do, Emmaline. I'm going to fill you up and fuck you until you're begging me to let you come."

She glared at me as I notched the tip of my cock between her pussy lips, right at the entrance to her channel. I fed her a half an inch, then pulled back and grabbed my shaft, dragging the head up her center. When the cool metal skimmed over her clit, Emma gasped, and her muscles seized up tight. "Want to know what it feels like inside you, baby?"

I brought the tip back down to her hole and pushed in an inch, then paused. "More?" I asked, trying to keep the smugness out of my tone. Based on her irritated huff, I failed. I retreated and her legs clamped around my waist, taking me in a couple more inches.

She looked at me expectantly and I stared back, waiting for her to give me what I wanted. Her walls spasmed and her greedy pussy tried to suck me in a little deeper. It tugged on the piercing, sending a shock wave of pleasure rocketing through my body.

It teased the sensitive nerves inside her, and she gasped. When she released the breath, she groaned and whispered, "More."

Chapter Seven

EMMA

RHYS'S COCKY EXPRESSION WOULD HAVE SERIOUSLY PISSED ME OFF IF HE hadn't been slowly feeding me his big, heavy cock, inch by delicious inch.

I'd been seriously irate to see he had a piercing—a fucking cock piercing, no less!—when he'd spent years giving me grief over mine. If it didn't feel so damn good inside me, I would have continued busting his ass over it.

Instead, I was desperate to feel more. I wanted to know what it felt like when it was deep inside me. "More," I moaned again.

Rhys pushed in a little further. I was slick with arousal, so he slid in, but he was so damn big that he had to work himself inside inch by inch.

"You're so fucking tight, baby," he groaned.

"It's been a while," I admitted. Then grumbled, "But you're freaking huge so it probably wouldn't have mattered.

Rhys laughed, but it morphed into a groan as he gained another inch. "We'll be lucky if your vice grip on my dick doesn't make me come before I get all the way inside you." He used shallow little thrusts to force his way past my walls, but the pleasurable sensations vibrated through my body, making me tense. "Relax, baby," he murmured in my ear. "I'm only halfway in, Emma. You need to—"

"Halfway?" I yelped. I felt stretched to my limit and stuffed full already and he was only halfway?

"Emmaline," he snapped, earning himself a scowl for using my full name. But he got my attention, which I supposed was the point, so I let it slide. "You need to relax!"

Speaking of sliding...I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, unclenching my muscles.

"That's it, baby," he praised. "Let me in. Good girl." He began rocking against me, his forward thrusts becoming a little more forceful until, finally, I felt his tip hit the back of my womb.

"Fuck, baby. You feel... I think I'll just stay here and live inside your pussy."

I would have laughed if I hadn't been overwhelmed with the need for him to move. "Live in later, fuck it now," I panted and clamped my muscles around his thick rod.

"Shit," he rasped. "Don't do that. I need to be gentle—"

Locking my legs tight around his waist, I arched my back, forcing him to slide impossibly deeper. I had no clue where he was putting it, but he'd found room somehow.

"I don't want gentle," I told him, my voice shaking from the passion building inside me. "Fast. Hard. Fuck me, Rhys."

"Emma—"

"You talk too much," I snapped.

He laughed, and while he was distracted by his amusement, I ripped my hands out of his grip and scored my nails down his back to cup his firm ass.

His chuckles disappeared abruptly, and he tensed. "You're playing with fire, baby."

I dug my fingers into his skin, tilted my pussy, and pressed my breasts against his chest. "I need to burn," I moaned.

Rhys's eyes bled to black, and I smiled inwardly because I knew I'd blown his control to bits. His pelvis jerked, and his cock pulsed inside me. He pulled out nearly to the tip before driving back in so hard, the force shoved me up the mattress a few centimeters.

"Fuck!" he bellowed as a scream ripped from my throat.

There was no finesse, no sweetness, no thought involved in what happened next.

It was pure, elemental, raw, animal fucking. And fucking hell... it was amazing.

Rhys hammered in and out of me, his piercing hitting all the right spots and driving me fast to my peak.

"You're close," Rhys grunted when my walls fluttered around him.

"Yessss," I agreed. "Oh, yes! Yes!"

"Hold it."

"But—"

"I'll stop," he warned.

If I hadn't been in the middle of the best sex I'd ever had, I would have cursed a motherfucking blue streak. But I wasn't an idiot, and he didn't bluff.

I closed my eyes and tried to concentrate on holding off my climax.

"Good girl," Rhys murmured right before he grazed a finger over my clit. "Just a little longer."

His cock was stretching me to the limit, and it burned like hell, but it also felt so, so good. "Please, Rhys," I begged, then bit my lip, hoping the sting would help me fight the need to let go.

"Fuck, Emma," he groaned. "Oh, fuck, baby. Fuck!"

He punched his hips three more times, and when I couldn't hold out another second, he shouted, "Now!"

I screamed as I gave myself over to my orgasm and it crashed over me, causing my head to spin. When the world wasn't blinking in and out, black spots danced in my vision. Beads of sweat ran from my temples into my hair.

It felt like an eternity before everything righted itself. Rhys collapsed on top of me but kept most of his weight on his elbows so he wouldn't crush me. His face was buried in the crook of my neck, and he chuckled when a few more shivers wracked my body.

My heart beat slowed, but then the sexy jackass had to go and lick over my pulse point. I squirmed, and it sent a streak of pleasure straight to my core. It was then I realized that the giant shaft still impaling me hadn't softened.

"Don't expect it to go down anytime soon," he mumbled. "He's waited years to get inside this pussy, and he has no intention of leaving it for the foreseeable future."

I chuckled and slipped my arms around his torso to give him a hug. However, when I squeezed, it caused my vaginal walls to clamp down on Rhys's cock. It twitched, and his piercing rubbed against my G-spot.

"Ooooooh," I moaned. I did it again, tilting my pelvis and humming at the delicious sensation.

"You like that?" Rhys asked softly, still sounding amused.

"Mmm-hmmm." I wiggled, and he hissed when I managed to tug on the barbell.

Slowly, he began to thrust again. But this time, there was no urgency to his movements. He kissed me with a sweet intensity that made me feel like I was living in a dream, one where I was loved by this man.

When we came up for air, he stared down at me, his gray eyes filled with softness. "You are so fucking beautiful, Emma."

Butterflies took flight in my stomach, and my cheeks heated, a blush stealing over my damp skin.

After a while, his languid pace became like torture. Every thrust was so deep, filling me completely, then leaving me empty when he retreated. My body screamed for him to speed up, to take me with a furious, wild abandon.

"I need you, Rhys," I breathed desperately, my nails digging into the skin of his biceps.

His voice was rough and tight when he replied, "Trust me, baby. I know what you need."

Instead of going faster, he continued to drive me out of my mind with his iron will. I whimpered and pumped my hips, squeezing my inner walls in an effort to fracture his control. He paused, and I cried out in frustration.

"I'll give you what you need, baby. But I decide when. You don't come until I tell you. Is that clear?"

I sucked in a breath and nodded. Why did I find it so fucking hot when he got all dominant and growly?

His fingers fluttered down my side, grazing the side of my breast, a sensitive spot that made my body break out in goosebumps. When they kept moving down and he teased my clit, I swallowed a sigh of relief.

"I know you need to come, baby," he practically purred in my ear as he gently teased my swollen bud with the pad of his thumb. "Tell me what you want."

"Make me come, Rhys," I begged, clenching my inner muscles around his shaft and eliciting a groan from deep in his chest.

Finally...fina-fucking-ly (pun intended). He sped up and rammed his girth into my channel over and over. His thumb rubbed my clit in tandem with the strokes of his cock. My mind was lost to

everything but the visceral sensations driving me wild and pushing me closer to the moment when I would become undone in his arms.

"Come, Emma," Rhys rasped in my ear before he captured my lips for a soul-deep kiss. One more punch of his hips, and he pinched my clit, sparking an explosion inside me that went on and on.

I ripped my mouth away and screamed, "Oh! Oh! Yes! Yes! Fuck!"

"Oh, fuck, Emma," Rhys ground out through his teeth. "Your pussy is too damn tight. Oh, fuck yeah, baby. Milk my cock dry. Fuck! Oh, fuck!"

His warm release filled me and it seemed to prolong my climax, sapping my strength until I collapsed, my arms and legs flopping onto the mattress.

I opened my eyes to see Rhys watching me with an intensity that had my nerve endings practically crackling from the electric current thrumming between us. I gulped when I registered that the bastard was still sporting a steel pipe buried in my pussy.

"You didn't think we were done, did you?"

"You can't seriously—" My protest was cut off when he suddenly rolled us over, settling me so I was straddling him.

"Ride me, baby," he demanded.

"I can't," I groaned.

"You will." He slapped my ass, making me jump, and when I came back down, I fell on his cock as he bucked up, slamming home. "Fuck!" he bellowed. His hands clamped around my hips, his fingers digging into my flesh and most likely leaving bruises. And damn, that just made me all kinds of tingly inside.

His grip held me steady as he guided me up and down again and again. The tension inside me built again and just when I thought it couldn't get any better, he rolled his hips, creating a whole new sensation. Each time he repeated the action, he hit my clit before rubbing his piercing along my most sensitive spot inside me.

Rhys shifted so that I was more firmly seated on him, and he could let me go. His hands cupped my breasts, squeezing them before he twisted and plucked my nipples. I cried out with every rush of sensation. He echoed the rhythm of his thrusts with his manipulation of my breasts. Each time he tugged on one of my hard

peaks, it sent a zing of pleasure straight to my clit just as he used his hips to create friction.

Before long, I was shaking with my need to come and Rhys didn't voice any objection. He played my body like a master, and when I reached for release, he pushed me over the edge. He followed right behind me, my name slinging to his lips as he broke apart beneath me.

I'd never felt anything like I'd experienced with Rhys—even without the orgasmic jewelry. It was a little frightening because I knew how fast and hard I could fall for him.

As we floated back down to reality, I snuggled deeper into Rhys's embrace and shoved my worries away.

Chapter Eight

EMMA

WHEN I WOKE UP, MY BODY WAS LANGUID AND DELICIOUSLY SORE. Warm skin pressed against my back and the heavy weight of a leg thrown over mine pinned me to the bed. But I didn't feel trapped. It was comforting and made me feel safe.

Until I remembered who it was and what had happened the night before. Just like that, I went from relaxed to tightly strung.

"I can feel you thinking, Emma," a low, velvety voice murmured in my ear, sending a shiver down my spine. "Stop freaking out."

"When has telling someone not to freak out ever kept them from freaking out?" I muttered, pushing his arms to break free from his embrace.

His arms were locked around me and he didn't even budge, which was both annoying and hot. *I need my head examined.*

"You have a point, but how about we try to stay calm and talk about what's bothering you?"

"I can't think with your naked body wrapped around me," I snapped, wriggling again, trying to scoot away.

Rhys chuckled, and it turned into a growl as he clamped a hand on my hip to still my movements. "Stop wiggling, or the only sound you'll be making is when you scream my name," he demanded in a gravelly voice.

I froze at his words and gasped at the feel of his hard cock growing bigger against my back, the barbell at the tip digging into my spine. A debate raged in my head as I tried to decide if I wanted to talk or scream. The piercing was tipping the scales in favor of multiple orgasms.

"Talk first," he mumbled into my neck. "Then I'll make you come so hard you won't have a voice left."

After last night, I knew that wasn't an empty promise, and heat engulfed my body as the memories played in my head.

Rhys suddenly flipped us over so I was on my back and he was looming over me. "Tell me what's bothering you."

He looked so fucking edible with his sleepy eyes and tousled hair. His sensuous mouth curved up into a smirk and my nipples hardened, begging to feel those lips sucking on them again.

"Focus, Emmaline."

His use of my full name snapped me out of my daze and I glared at him—exactly as he'd intended. I'd fallen into his little trap. His manipulation didn't upset me, but it was a little unnerving that he knew me so well.

"Emma," I corrected in a playful, disgruntled tone, which only made him smile wider.

His expression sobered, and he pushed some hair away from my face. "What's going on in that pretty head of yours, baby?"

"I was thinking about our parents... and Miles. How are they going to react to this? It's not like we can hide it for long. They fly on Saturday morning. They'll see right through us, Rhys!"

Rhys cupped my cheeks, and his gray eyes sparked with determination. "I don't give a fuck what anyone thinks, Emma. This is about you and me. I'm tired as fuck of denying what I feel for you. No hiding. I won't go back to pretending I don't want you with every breath I take. You're mine. And I'm not going to pretend otherwise."

I practically melted into a puddle at his declaration. He had a way with words.

"Okay. I'm yours," I agreed, melting a little more at the glint of happiness and satisfaction in his eyes. "But—"

"No buts," he grunted.

I sighed and put my hand over his mouth. "*But*, that means you're mine, too."

He nipped at my palm, and I laughed as I snatched my hand back. "Absofuckinglutely. I do not share, and I wouldn't expect you to either."

Relieved, I smoothed my hands up the ridges of his abs, over his chest, and around his neck to delve into his hair. I urged him to drop

his head and raised up to press my lips to his. My tongue licked along the seam of his mouth, and he groaned and took charge.

"The next time you leave this room, you won't be able to forget who owns this body. You'll feel me every time you move. A reminder of what it felt like to have my cock filling your pussy, stretching you, fucking you hard and deep."

When I woke up Saturday morning, I barely remembered anything from the previous two days. Some food, a little sleep, and a whole lot of fucking.

Rhys had kept his word. My throat was a little hoarse and my body felt well used, aching all over—but it was the kind of pain that had my temperature rising every time I thought about the cause. And that damn cock piercing...My pussy tingled as I remembered how it had felt when he was ramming his giant cock in and out of me. It had caused sensations I'd never experienced, and holy shit... it was quickly becoming an obsession. The way he'd reacted when I tugged on it while I had my lips wrapped around his dick had nearly sent me into a climax.

"Where do you think you are going, baby?" Rhys grunted, grabbing me around the waist and hauling me back against him before I could roll out of bed.

I laughed and turned my head to give him a quick kiss. "As much as I would prefer to spend another day holed up in this room with you, I have a ton of stuff to do before the rehearsal dinner tonight."

Rhys kissed me thoroughly until I almost forgot about my responsibilities. Then he released me with a good-natured grumble. "I'm not ready to share you yet."

I loved the possessiveness in his voice, which floored me since it was something that had driven me insane with past relationships. "Same."

I reluctantly crawled out of bed and walked on unsteady legs to the bathroom. Damn, he hadn't been kidding when he said I'd feel him every time I moved.

After starting the shower, I contemplated locking the door because I knew what would happen if I didn't. I would already be late for my first meeting if I didn't hurry. Ultimately, I decided to risk it and even cracked the door before stepping under the hot spray.

Predictably, Rhys joined me, doing all kinds of dirty things before finally cleaning ourselves up.

As we stepped out of the shower, wrapped in warmed, fluffy towels, he snaked an arm around me and pulled me into him, front to front. "I can't wait to have this every day," he murmured, brushing his lips softly over mine. "Although, I'll have to plan for extra time to get ready in the morning because I don't think I'll be able to start my day without a taste of you."

It was a good thing I hadn't put on my underwear yet because his words drenched my pussy. I loved the sound of that, but I still wasn't completely sure about where we stood. Never one to play games, I blurted, "You're talking as if this is long term. Are you sure that's what you want?"

Rhys frowned as he leaned back to stare down at me. "Of course, it is. I don't do casual sex, Emma. This isn't a one-night—or in this case, multiple-night—fling. This"—he gestured between us—"isn't over. You're mine, remember?"

I squirmed at his seductive tone and the images of every time he'd "reminded" me of that over the last couple of days.

"Good." I beamed at him as I glided my hand over the damp skin of his stomach and hip, then down to his very fine butt. His gray eyes darkened and his shaft swelled, pressing into my belly. Then I grinned and pinched his sexy ass hard. "Now, let me go so I can get ready."

He growled and his arms tightened for a moment, but then they loosened and dropped from around me. "You'll pay for that later, baby."

I couldn't wait.

Sometime during our two-day fuck-fest, I'd popped down to my room to grab some essentials. I blow-dried my hair, then stood in my towel applying makeup while I watched Rhys in the mirror. He did everything with such fluidity and confidence that he looked sexy no matter what he was doing. I loved the ease between us, the simplicity of being together and getting ready for our day. It was as appealing as waking up with his body wrapped around mine.

My suit for the day was hanging in the closet, so I went in there to dress. Then I picked up my pink shoes with a clear, five-inch heel. They had little poodles and Eiffel Towers on the fabric and a silver ruffle that started out small at the toes and grew bigger as it went

around the back of the shoe. The words "Ooo, la, la" were scrawled over the outside of each shoe in silver glitter.

I took them to the front room and set them on the floor by the couch as I repacked my things into the overnight bag I'd brought.

"Don't forget to switch out your tongue piercing," Rhys said in a teasing tone and a playful swat on my ass as he walked by.

"Oops," I replied before sticking my tongue out at him.

"Don't be a tease unless you are prepared for the consequences, baby."

I squeezed my thighs together at his dark, seductive tone and distracted myself by digging through my travel case for my clear barbel. "Damn, I must have left it in my room," I muttered.

"Want me to run down and grab it?" I shrugged. "No, it's not a big deal. Nobody notices it. I was vigilant about it when I first started working in event planning. But I've built a strong enough reputation that even if someone does notice it on the job, they find the juxtaposition between my two personalities vastly amusing."

"Why don't you stick to the clear one?" he asked while he rummaged around in the fancy kitchenette. He was looking in the small refrigerator but raised his head and grinned at me. "I wouldn't want you to take it out permanently once you stop wearing the others. It's sexy as fuck." Then he disappeared again.

Setting my things down, I planted my hands on my hips, a sinking feeling invading my stomach. "What do you mean when I stop wearing the others?"

Rhys closed the door holding a carton of orange juice and turned to take a couple of glasses down from a cupboard. "You know how to look mature and professional, something I somehow missed over the last few years. Since you'll have to dress like that nearly all the time, I assume you'll eventually stop wearing your... wild-child wardrobe and piercings." He picked up the glasses of orange juice and started toward me. "I wish I'd known before now. I wouldn't have wasted so much time worrying if we were compatible."

The sinking feeling became a rock of dread. He'd said it like it was a foregone conclusion, and if that were the case, we had a real problem. Maybe I'd misunderstood him? It was unlikely, but I had to hope.

"My wild-child wardrobe? Let me get this straight. You think the way I dress on my off-hours is a carry-over from my rebellious teen

years?"

Rhys laughed and handed me one of the glasses. "I suppose, though I wouldn't have thought to word it that way." When I didn't take his offering, his smile slipped and his brow furrowed slightly. "Don't get me wrong, baby, I see all woman when I look at you, no matter what you're wearing—or not wearing." His lips curved cockily. "And I can admit, your rocker-chick look is sexy as fuck, but it's not the kind of clothes you wear when you're with someone like me."

"Someone like you," I repeated. It was the only thing I could get past the rage building inside me.

He frowned again, setting both glasses on an end table. "That didn't come out right. I just meant that your professional style is more appropriate when you're with a politician. If I decide to run for mayor—"

"Then you'll need a partner who is as uptight and boring as you?"

Rhys scowled and took a step toward me. "That's not what I'm saying, and you know it, Emmaline."

Ah, we were back to Emmaline. This was not going the way I'd expected when we talked about our future this morning.

"Isn't it? The way I dress when I'm not on the job is not a phase, Rhys. It's not a rebellion, or a statement, or anything except an expression of who I am. It fits me, just like how I dress while working expresses another side of me that fits. But either way, it's all *me*."

"I know that, baby," he sighed. He took another step forward, and this time I backed up, making his scowl deepen.

"I don't think you do," I argued as I leaned over to zip up my small duffel. "If you did, what I wear wouldn't matter to you. You'd see that I'm the same person either way." Grabbing the strap to my bag, I put it over my shoulder, then picked up my purse. "You're asking me to discard part of myself, to change into someone I'm not. I won't do that."

Rhys closed the distance between us before I realized he was moving. He captured my chin and held it firmly. "Even to be with me?"

A sharp pain sliced through my heart as it broke. "That you would even ask it of me tells me everything I need to know about

this relationship. Or whatever this was.”

I wrenched my head out of his hand and pushed him with all my might. He wasn't expecting the move, so he stumbled back a few steps. I spun around, bent to pick up my shoes, and hurried to the door.

Before I could open it, Rhys's hand slammed onto it, keeping it shut. “This is a fucking relationship, Emmaline. You're mine, and I'm not letting you go.”

“You only want part of me, Rhys. And that's not enough for me. Now, let me go. I'm already late for a meeting with the caterer.”

He clearly wanted to stop me from leaving, but he was well aware of the responsibilities I had on my plate the next two days, and he couldn't keep me from them. Neither of us was willing to ruin our friends' wedding so that we could continue to fight.

With a deep breath, he removed his hand and allowed me to pull the door open. He grabbed the edge in a grip so hard his knuckles turned white. “This isn't over, baby,” he growled.

I ignored him and made a beeline for the stairwell, yelling, “Don't forget your fucking speech!” over my shoulder. I couldn't walk down from the penthouse floor, so I went down several flights to wait for the elevator without his eyes burning a hole in my back.

Chapter Nine

RHYS

WELL, I ROYALLY FUCKED THAT UP.

After Emma disappeared, I stalked over to the couch and dropped down in a huff, barely noticing the slam of the door when it swung shut.

I ran through our entire conversation and wanted to bang my head against a wall for explaining things so poorly. I didn't want her to change.

Except... the more I went over everything, the more I realized what a fucking idiot I was. She was right. I was asking her to be someone she wasn't, to push aside one facet of her very being, which would leave her a shell of herself because she would be missing something so vital.

I pushed up from the sofa and trudged to the bedroom. Her scent still lingered in the air and my stomach twisted painfully. Going through the motions, I continued to get ready, but my mind was still working through the situation.

I'd wanted Emma for years. Long before I ever saw her in pantsuits and subtle makeup. I'd admired her strength, her confidence in who she was, and her lack of tolerance for bullshit. I now realized why we'd never been around each other without butting heads. My attitude, my belief that we were incompatible, was complete and utter bullshit.

When I'd told Emma that I wanted her with every breath, I'd been deadly serious. And the idea of being without her was like a lead blanket on my chest, keeping me from drawing in enough

oxygen to survive. She was essential to me, and I wouldn't give her up without a fight.

Easier said than done...

The next time I saw her was at the rehearsal dinner. She looked amazing in her pale pink halter top. The cowl neckline dipped low in the front, but only enough to tease at her cleavage. It was a loose crop top that bared just enough skin to show off the diamond charm—it seemed she'd traded out the little silver football for the occasion—dangling from her belly button. Her gauzy, floor-length skirt was the same color as the top and looked simple until she walked, and two very high slits showed off more of her legs than I would have preferred other men to see.

Her dark hair was curled with half of it pulled up. The rest hung down her back, giving peekaboo glimpses of her silky skin since the top was nearly backless. Her makeup was bold, and she was wearing all of her piercings. She looked fucking gorgeous. Like my Emma.

It suddenly hit me. In all the fantasies I'd had of Emma, and there had been a fuck of a lot, she'd always looked like this beautiful woman in front of me. I never pictured her without the colorful streaks in her hair, without the cute little diamond in her nose that sparkled like her incredible green eyes. And I'd certainly dreamed about her tongue piercing more than I cared to admit.

Even after I'd seen her in her professional getup, she starred in my dreams looking like the woman I'd fallen for so many years ago.

I tore my eyes away from her body when I noticed she'd stopped to speak to the same man I'd seen her with that night she'd stormed out of the bar. She laughed at something he said and jealousy stirred in my gut.

Before I could stop myself, I stomped over to them and stopped right behind Emma's back, giving the man a hard stare.

One corner of his lips tipped up in a knowing smirk that made me want to knock a few of his perfect teeth out. "Hello, Rhys."

It appeared we knew each other, so I studied him a little closer. His suit was immaculately tailored and pressed, his blond hair styled perfectly, and he had a suave, confident air that reminded me of... "Sebastian Brant?"

"The one and only," he replied with a megawatt smile that surely schmoozed every upset patron, particularly the female ones.

Sebastian and Gabe went way back, friends since childhood. We'd met a half dozen times over the years, but it had always been in a more casual setting. Not that Sebastian was ever truly casual. His idea of dressing down was pressed jeans, a button-down shirt rolled up to the elbows, and Oxfords.

I stepped to the side of Emma, and we shook hands. "Gabe told me you were managing a resort in The Keys. I should have realized it was this one." I paused, remembering something else Gabe had mentioned. "Have you bought it yet?" A calculating gleam entered Sebastian's eyes, and he shook his head. "In negotiations, but it's hush, hush for now."

"Good luck. I'm sure this place will be *the* destination spot before you're done with it."

Sebastian inclined his head to acknowledge my compliment, but his eyes were on something behind me. "If I'm going to be hosting your wedding here eventually, I suggest you go after your woman."

I groaned when I realized Emma had slipped away while I was speaking with Sebastian. "I'll catch up with you another time," I muttered, heading in Emma's direction.

She was talking to Lennox when I reached her, and knowing he wouldn't mind, I stepped directly in front of her. "Emmaline," I growled. "We need to talk."

Emma raised her chin stubbornly and glared right back at me. "Save it for your speech," she snipped haughtily. "And it's *Emma*." Then she turned her head and gave Lennox a bright smile. "Don't mind him. My brother is nervous about his best man duties. Come this way."

She turned around, ignoring me as she walked away. But I knew she heard my deadly growl. "I am not your fucking brother."

She led me on a merry chase, although we'd both attempted to catch up with Miles because he looked like someone had kicked his puppy. But at some point, he'd managed to slip out unnoticed.

By the end of the night, she'd successfully avoided me to the point where I was ready to grab her and lock her in our hotel room until she agreed to listen to what I had to say.

After congratulating Gabe and Avery again, I looked around, determined to finally nail down Emma's sexy little ass. But she was nowhere to be found.

I was contemplating my next steps when my phone vibrated in my pocket. Knowing it wouldn't be Emma unless I'd been given some kind of miracle, I almost ignored it. But, on the slim, practically non-existent chance that a saint was on my side, I withdrew it from my coat pocket.

The number was a New York City area code and looked slightly familiar, so I went ahead and answered it. "Rhys MacKenna."

"Rhys!"

I frowned at the obnoxious sound of Ryan Janick's voice. Ryan was the first person to approach me about putting my hat into the mayoral race. He was an annoying little shit and a little slimy at times, but he'd come with the backing of some very powerful and highly respected donors.

My answer was a resounding no. But he kept at me, and I was frequently courted by some of said donors. After a while, they'd convinced me that I could do more good in the city as Mayor than all the smaller changes I supported with my time and money.

"How's it going, my friend?"

I ground my teeth to keep from snarling that we were in no way, shape, or form "friends."

"Sorry to bother you during the wedding, but Kenson is pushing for a final answer so we can hit the ground running with your campaign. We want to start with the..."

I decided to run weeks ago, but for some reason, I'd never given them my definitive answer. As Ryan droned on about their plans for me, I thought about Emma. About what she would think of this whole thing. How she would handle it.

Emma didn't know how to be anything other than herself. She wouldn't put up with anyone coercing her to be what others expected...

Was there was an entry in the Guinness Book of World Records for how many times a man could realize he was a fucking asshole in one day. Sadie had been right; I was a fucking idiot. For asking Emma to change, for letting her go, and for doing something that would truly disappoint her.

If I wanted to prove to Emma that I loved her—*all of her*—I needed to take a good look at who I wanted to be and be that man. Because I did love her. And though she deserved someone much better than me, I wouldn't let her go. Ever.

"I'm out, Ryan," I said firmly.

"Out?" he repeated, his tone filled with confusion.

"Take my name off your list of potential candidates. I don't want to be Mayor. Or hold any other political office. And take me off the call list you use to solicit donors. I'll find the people and causes I want to support. We're done."

Ryan was still sputtering when I hung up the phone. I took a deep breath and realized that other than when I'd had Emma in my arms, it was the first time I could breathe in a very long time.

"I'm proud of you, Rhys."

I looked up to see my father leaning against a pillar a few feet away from me. He and my stepmother had come into town this morning. We'd had lunch, but I hadn't filled them in on anything related to Emma, afraid they would see right through me.

"I've been waiting for you to realize you didn't want to run for Mayor," Paula said with a soft smile.

"Pardon?" I didn't know, so how could they?

"You are so confident in who you are, I was quite shocked when you let people get in your head and convince you to be a politician," she explained. "But after a while, I realized you were using it as an excuse to avoid something else in your life."

Damn, she knew me well.

She patted my cheek lovingly. "I'm so proud of the men you and Miles have become."

Guilt crept in. How would she look at me when she realized I'd broken her daughter's heart? She'd been more of a mother to me than my own. Always there for me, loving me unconditionally.

"Does this mean you've finally pulled your head out of your ass and gone after Emma?"

My dad's blunt question nearly knocked me on my ass. "You knew...?"

Paula laughed. "I think the only person other than Emma who had no idea how you felt about her was Miles. That boy's head is firmly in the sand when it comes to his sister and men." She rolled her eyes, but they were filled with affection.

"I screwed up with her," I admitted in a ragged voice. I was both relieved they accepted Emma and me as a couple, and exhausted now these weights were being lifted off me one by one.

"So fix it," my dad said simply.

I laughed and hugged them both. "I will. See you tomorrow."

Unfortunately, my plan to track down my woman and work things out was foiled by the "night before" wedding tradition. The girls were spending the night together because the groom couldn't see the bride... blah, blah, motherfucking blah. I was sorely tempted to crash the party, but I reminded myself that it would only further piss off Emma and make it more difficult for her to forgive my fuck up.

As I was getting ready for the ceremony the next day, there was a knock on my door and I hurried to answer it, hoping it would be Emma.

Instead, I found my brother looking like he wanted to tear my head off and punt. He pushed into the room and growled, "So I had an interesting conversation with our parents."

Fuck. I imagine they'd been hoping to give Miles time to digest it before talking to me. Unfortunately, from the rage spitting from his eyes, it didn't appear to have worked.

"You're my brother, Rhys. My best friend. And for that reason, I'm giving you one chance to convince me not to cut off your balls and toss you in the ocean for the sharks to finish off."

I wanted to laugh at the visual he'd painted, but it would probably ruin any chance of convincing him I was serious about Emma.

"I love her."

That took the wind out of Miles's sails, and he gaped at me. "You're serious, aren't you?"

I nodded.

His eyes narrowed. "What about the perfect politician's wife bullshit?"

"I had my head up my ass, according to just about everyone. And I decided politics isn't for me."

Miles didn't seem to know what to do with that information. He cocked his head and stared at me, still a little suspicious. "I was preoccupied last night, but it doesn't mean I didn't see how my sister reacted when you were near," he said. "If you love her, maybe you can explain why she looked like you were the devil incarnate."

Running a hand through my hair, I sighed and began to pace. "Because I fucked up. I said some stupid shit and realized how stupid too late."

"You brought up her image, didn't you?" Miles rolled his eyes and flopped down onto the couch. "You're an asshole, Rhys."

"We've established this, Miles," I ground out through a clenched jaw. "Now, how do I fix it?"

"How the fuck would I know?"

I scowled at my brother. "You're her twin. You have some weird connection thing. Help me out."

"Why would I do that?"

I held my hands out at my sides and gave him complete honesty. "Because I can't live without her, Miles."

He watched me for a long minute, then sighed as he stood up. "She needs to know that you won't accept anything less than all of her. And that she will always come first. It's what she deserves, and if you don't hold up to those promises, the knife and the sharks will seem like a pleasant way to die."

"Noted."

Miles walked over and gave me a one-armed hug and a slap on the back. "If I have to see Emma with someone, you're the least objectionable option."

Laughing, I shoved him toward the door. "Thanks, little brother. Now go get ready for the wedding."

He gave me a wave and headed for the door.

"Miles," I called before he opened it. He turned, his eyebrows lifted in silent question. "I'm glad to see you happy. You and Sadie seem right for each other." His brow lifted even higher, and I grinned. "You could never get anything past me as kids. Did you think now would be any different?"

His mouth kicked up into a smile that reached his green eyes. "Thanks, Rhys. She's everything to me." Then he lifted his chin in farewell and was gone.

Chapter Ten

EMMA

THE SOFT BREEZE RUFFLING THE CURTAINS AROUND THE PERGOLA GAVE the whole ceremony an ethereal feel. Avery's dress was perfect, and Gabe looked dashing in his suit, staring at her like she'd hung the moon.

I glanced to Gabe's right and flinched when I met dark, intense eyes. Rhys was staring straight at me and not being the least bit subtle about it. I quickly shifted my attention back to the bride and groom, but I could still feel the heat of his gaze, like a caress over my skin.

When he'd taken his place beside Gabe, they'd been talking, so I'd taken the opportunity to drink in the sight of him. Damn, he looked good. The suit emphasized his broad shoulders and brought out a little blue in his gray orbs.

Part of me could imagine a day like this for us. Rhys standing at the altar, waiting for me to walk down the aisle, then pledging our love and promising to spend our lives together.

There was no use in denying it anymore. I loved Rhys, but he'd broken my heart, and I had no idea how I was going to move on from him. Pining was never my style, though, so I was determined to make it happen.

Then Gabe turned to face the minister, and Rhys looked around until his eyes landed on me.

Suddenly, I wasn't so confident in my ability to move on, especially when he was looking at me like I was his next meal after a year of starvation.

I tried to focus on the ceremony, and eventually, I got caught up in the romance of their love. When Gabe dipped Avery and kissed her, I cheered as loud as everyone else. I was truly happy for my friends and so excited they'd be spending their lives together.

After the ceremony, we spent an hour taking pictures before making our way over to the outdoor patio where they'd set up the reception. I'd checked and double-checked and triple-checked everything—until the staff kicked me out—to make sure it was perfect.

"Stop."

I turned to find Avery glaring at me with her hands on her hips. "What?" I asked, the picture of innocence.

"Stop working. Everything has been more wonderful than I could have ever dreamed. You gave me a perfect fairytale, Emma. Now enjoy it."

I grinned and gave her a hug. "I'm so glad I was able to give you your perfect day. I'm so happy for you and Gabe."

"I want you to be happy, too, Em." Avery's eyes slid to the left, and I knew she was looking at Rhys. "Maybe you should talk to him. Hear him out."

My shoulders sagged, and the tears I'd been barely holding at bay rushed forward. "What if he breaks my heart even more?"

Avery bit her lip and glanced up, looking over my shoulder. "What if he doesn't?"

I felt heat at my back. Swallowing hard, I slowly turned around.

"Make her stop working and enjoy herself, would you?" Avery chirped as she bounced away.

Before I could even react to Rhys's presence, he pulled me onto the dance floor and into his arms.

"You look beautiful, baby," he murmured, resting his cheek on my head as we swayed to a slow, romantic tune.

"Thank you," I whispered, sniffing from the tears burning my eyes and nose.

"Oh, Emma. Baby, please don't cry."

"I'm not," I protested in a watery voice, even as droplets rolled down my cheeks.

"You're killing me," he groaned. "I know I deserve to feel like a bastard, but seeing you cry..." He sighed. "Emma, please look at me."

I sniffed again and wiped my face on his coat to erase the tears.

"Did you seriously use my jacket as a tissue, Emmaline?"

There was a teasing lilt to his voice that made me giggle. "It's *Emma*," I replied with an over dramatic sigh that made him chuckle. When I finally lifted my head, I was blown away by the overwhelming emotion on Rhys's face.

"I know these words are empty without proof, but I can't go another second without telling you." Rhys swallowed hard, and I gasped at the raw vulnerability in his eyes. "I love you, Emmaline Hensley."

I wanted to say it back, but the words got caught in my throat. After a few seconds, I cleared my throat. "You love me?"

"More than anything in this world, baby. I love every part of you. Your tender heart, your courage, your confidence, and this unbelievable sexy body. I love that your laugh is contagious. People can't help but be happy when they're around you. I love your brilliant mind and sassy mouth. Even your shoe addiction—although, to be fair, I'm hoping that will pay off when you model them for me naked."

I laughed, and he continued.

"I love that you can be serious, a professional who is dedicated to her job, and that you can also be wild and untamed. I love how you claim you love horror movies but spend the whole time covering your eyes. The way you dance with abandon whenever your favorite song comes on."

I couldn't do anything but stare at him as he kept going. How did he know me so well? Not even Avery knew all the little things Rhys had somehow picked up on. "Stop," I choked out when the tears threatened to come again. "What—what about your perfect image?" I stuttered.

"Fuck my image. The only thing I ever want to see in my reflection is you by my side."

"I don't want you to change for me," I said quietly, voicing one of my biggest fears. If either of us expected that from the other, we would grow to resent it.

"I'm making some changes in my life, Emma. But not *for* you, it's *because* of you. It took me a bit to realize I was monumentally screwing up my life, but once I did, I stood back and decided what I wanted and not what others had convinced me I should. For

someone who has always been strong in my convictions, confident in who I was, I'm a little embarrassed to admit that I lost myself for a while there."

"And what is it you want?"

"You."

"Just me?" Would I be enough?

Rhys chuckled. "No."

I stared at him in shock, trying to figure out what the fuck was happening.

"It's easy to lose yourself if you live solely for someone else. I need you more than anything, baby. But I also want a job I love, a family, and friends. I love all of you, Emma. All the things that make you who you are."

I took a deep breath, absorbing everything Rhys had said. When I exhaled, I let my worries go, and the heartbreak sailed away with it. "I love you, too. More than anything. Even my shoes."

Rhys tossed his head back and laughed until tears were cascading down his cheeks. Then he cupped my cheeks and lifted my face for a long, sweet kiss.

Once he pulled back, he put his lips to my ear, and his warm breath sent a bolt of lust to my core. "You didn't let me finish earlier. There's one more thing I love." He gathered me into his arms, so close that our bodies were practically glued together.

"What's that?" I gasped as I felt his dick swelling and lengthening against my stomach.

"I love the way your tight pussy squeezes the fuck out of my cock."

Heat engulfed me, throwing me off balance and making Rhys grin. However, I had a little secret that would knock that sexy smirk off his face. "If I were wearing panties, they would be drenched right now."

Rhys's eyes bulged, and he sucked in a quick breath. He grabbed my hand and dragged me toward the hotel. I laughed and sped up my steps, eager to be alone.

Chapter Eleven

EMMA

RHYS PICKED ME UP WHEN WE REACHED THE ROOM, CARRYING ME OVER the threshold as if we were the bride and groom.

I giggled, and he winked at me. "Just practicing."

My heart felt like it was going to explode. Did he just insinuate that he wants to marry me?

He snatched back my attention when I laid me on the mattress, unhooked my halter top and slowly drew it down. When he reached my waist, he grasped my skirt and dragged both of them off before dropping them to the ground.

Before I could complain that he was still clothed, he smiled seductively as he stripped down to nothing. There was something about watching Rhys undress that made my core clench.

When he was naked, he stood there for a moment, just staring at me. His was cock long and thick, bouncing against the ridges of his abs when he breathed, and the silver barbel through the tip glinted in the soft light coming from the lamp beside the bed.

I watched him through heavy-lidded eyes as he crawled up my body. His piercing rubbed along my thigh as he leaned in, closing the distance between our lips. "Fuck, I want you, baby. I've watched you all night, praying you'd forgive me. Now that we're here, I can't wait any longer to be inside you."

Rhys pressed his lips to mine and our tongues danced while he ran his hands all over my body. It was an assault on all my senses at once and I blissfully moaned. His palms coasted over my breasts and down my stomach to rest at the top of my pelvis. I held my breath, waiting to see what he would do next.

I shivered when he ran his finger along my wet lips. "So slick and creamy," he groaned. His finger was coated in my juices when he raised his hand to his mouth and sucked the digit clean. Then he dipped it into my pussy once more and his hand brought it to my mouth, encouraging me to lick it. "See how good you taste, baby?" I nodded, and he smiled before leaning down to kiss me again.

His tongue fucked my mouth, imitating what his cock would do to my pussy—hopefully very soon. I mewled in protest when he pulled back and he smirked at me, causing me to narrow my eyes in warning. He placed his palms on my inner thighs and slowly pushed my legs open until I was spread as far as I could comfortably go. Then he knelt between them before sitting back on his heels. His gray eyes roamed all over, drinking in the sight before him. The satisfaction gleaming in his orbs made me feel beautiful.

When his eyes locked on my pussy, he wrapped a hand around his cock and pumped it lazily. "You are so beautiful," he murmured in an almost reverent tone. "I could sit and stare at you all day." One corner of his mouth quirked up. "Okay, perhaps not all day," he amended. "At some point, I'd have to fuck you."

Despite how turned on I was, I giggled and that made him smile widely. "I love you so fucking much, Emma."

"I love you, too, Rhys. But if you don't get to the 'fucking' part pretty soon, I'm going to attach your cock piercing to a vibrator to get what I want."

Rhys's expression darkened, and he growled, "Nothing and no one goes in this pussy unless I put it there."

Before I could taunt him further, he grabbed my legs and positioned one on each shoulder, then slammed inside me with a grunted, "Mine!"

The stretch from his considerable girth burned, but it was absolutely worth it. Slowly, he pulled out of my heat and the silver bar on his tip dragged along the most sensitive spot inside me. "Rhys," I hissed as I lifted my hips, begging for him to come back to me.

"I fucking love the way you say my name, Emma." Rhys slammed home again, and I gasped when his piercing hit my cervix and my back arched. He was so deep it hurt, a delicious pain that sent me spiraling toward my climax.

Rhys grunted and began moving in and out, setting a steadily increasing pace until he was pounding the bed into the wall.

"Oh, yes!" I cried out. "Yes! Oh, Rhys, that's it! Yes!" My words seem to spur him on, making him move faster.

"Fuck, baby, you're gripping my cock so tight. Fuck, yeah. Come on, Emma, fuck yourself on my dick. Oh, yeah, baby. Give me more. Oh, fuck! Fuck!"

Without warning, he changed the angle of entry and my orgasm shot through me. I felt like I'd been sliced in half and both sides burst apart and were caught up in a gust of wind, creating a whirlwind of sensation. My head fell back, and I screamed his name as my fingers fisted in the blankets, trying to find something to hold on to. My body convulsed around his cock and after two more thrusts, he planted himself as deep as possible and exploded, shouting my name.

Eventually, our breathing evened out, and I opened my eyes to see Rhys smiling down at me. He lowered my legs on either side of his body while keeping us connected.

A moan escaped my lips and my eyes widened as I realized he was still fully swollen and stiff inside me. "You're still hard?" I panted.

His smile became a cocky grin. "Baby, I'm always hard when you are around." He palmed my breasts and winked. "Especially when you're naked."

Laughter bubbled up, but it faded out when his face turned soft, and he stared at me with his heart in his eyes.

"I love you, Emma. I want this,"—he pointed between his chest and mine—"us. To be together for the rest of our lives.

Moisture gathered in my eyes, and I sniffed. "I want that, too."

Rhys's eyes widened, and he shook his head, his expression a little frantic. "Nuh uh. None of that now. No crying."

"Then don't say sweet shit," I giggled.

He glared at me as he swiped the tears from my cheeks, which only brought a fresh round of tears because when he did stuff like that, I could physically feel his love wrapping around me.

His eyes narrowed, and a determined glint entered them. He moved again, slow and sweet. "From now on, this is how I'm going to deal with your tears."

"I don't think you'll hear me complain," I moaned, lifting my hips to meet his languid thrusts.

Our eyes were locked, both of us lost in the emotions surging between us. I was so in love with this man. "I love you, Rhys." Raising my chin, I offered him my lips, and he sealed his mouth over mine. Our kiss was a tangle of passion and the pent-up need that we'd repressed for so long. With Rhys, everything felt new again. Everything felt...right.

He owned me. I'd given him my whole heart, which would've been terrifying if I didn't know I had his too.

Later, as we cuddled in bed, Rhys kissed my temple. "When is the lease on your place up?"

I raised my head from his chest and eyed him as I answered. "It's month to month. They only require a thirty-day notice." I watched for any panic or doubt, but there was only an infusion of happiness.

"Perfect. I'll schedule movers to come and pack you up as soon as we get back to New York."

"So, I'm just moving in with you, am I?" I teased, not at all upset about his high-handed assumption.

"Oh, baby, it's so much more than that," he replied with a devious twinkle in his gray orbs. "We're getting married as soon as possible."

I fought the huge grin that threatened to eclipse my face and attempted a frown. "Don't you think you should ask me first?"

Rhys winked at me. "You don't really have a choice, but if it makes you happy... Emmaline Hensley, will you marry me?"

"Yes!" I screamed as I launched myself at him, kissing him with every sparkle of happiness that filled me.

He took over and soon we were both panting with need. "Will it always be like this between us?" I wondered, trying to catch my breath.

"Yes," Rhys answered simply, and it melted my heart.

"I love you," I told him again. Just because I could.

"Not nearly as much as I love you, baby."

Content, I laid my head down again, and a smile spread across my face.

This wedding had been Avery's fairytale, and yet, I'd found my own.

Elle Christensen Books and Bio

I'm a lover of all things books and have always had a passion for writing. Since I am a sappy romantic, I fell easily into writing romance. I love a good HEA! I'm a huge baseball fan, a blogger, and obsessive reader.

My husband is my biggest supporter and he's incredibly patient and understanding about the people in my head who are fighting with him for my attention.

I hope you enjoy reading my books as much as I enjoyed writing them!

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Ruby & Austin

HOPE FORD

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CHAPTER 1

Austin

I LEAN BACK IN THE SEAT OF THE POSH MOTEL, TENSE. I'M NOT comfortable trading in the open range for the stifling confines of this immaculate if somewhat uppity hotel. I definitely don't look the part as I take in my worn cowboy boots that are scuffing up the glistening floor. It's no wonder I keep getting stared at.

But I'm determined to stay.

For two days I've sat in the lobby of this hotel, waiting and hoping for a glimpse of Ruby Sutton. She was supposed to be here yesterday, and after doing a little eavesdropping, I've discovered that she had something come up at work and she's arriving tonight. So here I sit, waiting, and not patiently.

It's been seven years, so a day or two shouldn't bother me, but it does. Ever since I talked to my younger sister Becky this past week and she laid it all out for me, I've been antsy and on edge. She's pregnant with her first child, and it seems to have made her even more sensitive and nostalgic than ever. Which, thank fuck, I guess or else I may have gone another seven years without knowing that Ruby Sutton, Becky's best friend when she was younger, left Clover Springs because of me.

I lean my head back on the soft cushion and clench my eyes shut. There are so many *what ifs* that are going through my head, but I can't focus on one of them. The only thing that I keep hearing is Becky's voice and our conversation about Ruby.

There's something bothering her lately, but she's not talking to me about it.

That was what started it all. Becky is worried about Ruby, and just like every other time I've heard her name, I tensed up. "She hasn't been to visit Clover Springs in a long time. Maybe she should come home and visit her mom and dad."

Frustrated and rubbing her large pregnant belly, Becky rolled her eyes at me. "She avoids coming anywhere near you or Whiskey Valley since she left seven years ago."

"Me?" I asked, surprised. "What do I have to do with her staying away from here?"

Her family's ranch is in Clover Springs, which is right next to Whiskey Valley where my ranch is. None of what Becky was saying made sense to me.

Becky looked at me, and the knowing look on her face told me exactly what she was thinking. She knew about the kiss I'd shared with Ruby. Even though I'd never mentioned a word about it, she knew. Which means Ruby told her.

"She loved you, Austin," she huffed at me.

I started to say something, but she held her hand up to stop me. "And don't tell me that she was eighteen and didn't know what love was. She did, and when you told her you weren't interested, you broke her heart."

It all comes back to me in a rush. Everything Becky told me comes back with a vengeance, and I rub my hand over my chest, thinking about it.

She loved you... really loved you.

She went to school in New York because distance would be the only thing that could help her move on.

She asks about you all the time.

She still hasn't forgotten about you.

That was last week, and I almost went to New York then until Becky told me about the wedding. One of their friends was getting married in the Keys, and Ruby was going to be here all week. It took some doing, but I worked my ass off on the ranch to get ready to take the week off. I called in my cousins. They're bull riders, but they fixed it where they would all take shifts helping me on the ranch. I hated leaving, but I knew I had to.

For seven years, I've wondered what would have happened if I'd taken her up on what she was offering. Ruby was a temptation like I've never known, and on her eighteenth birthday, I bought her a

locket and delivered it to her at her father's ranch. I could have sent it through Becky, and that's what I should have done, but I needed to see her. I wanted to be there and witness her lighting up at the gift I'd thought long and hard on giving her.

I was nervous and probably even feeling a little guilty. I was ten years older than her, and I had no business seeking her out. She was my little sister's best friend and way too young for me, but none of that mattered to me that day. I found her in the barn, petting her horse, Chestnut. She was surprised to see me, and when I handed her the blue box with the big bow on it, she smiled at me in a way that still makes my heart rate pick up just thinking about it. She hurriedly opened it and pulled it out of the box. Her mouth fell open when she looked at the gold heart locket necklace. I hadn't put anything in it, even though I had wanted to put a picture of me and her, but that would have been a dead giveaway to my feelings.

With the locket in her hand, she'd dove into my arms, and I held on to her as she thanked me over and over. When she pulled back, I should have put some distance between us, but I didn't. I couldn't let go. And when she went on tiptoe, looking up at me wide-eyed as if I'd just hung the moon, I didn't have a choice. My hands tightened on her waist, and I leaned down and pressed my lips to hers. From that point on, I haven't looked at another woman. I definitely haven't kissed one. Her lips, her taste, the feel of her pressed against me has been the only thing I've wanted since. No one else will do.

The kiss was everything, and when we pulled away, breathless, I was ready to ask her for any and everything she was willing to give. But when I looked into her wide, shocked, innocent eyes, I knew that I shouldn't. She had her whole life before her. She had dreams of living in the big city, she'd graduated top of her class, and her future was bright. She didn't need a cowboy that was tied to his land without a future outside of Whiskey Valley. She needed to live her life and make all her dreams come true. And so when I told her that she was my little sister's best friend, sort of like my own little sister, a part of me died inside. I'll never get over the look she gave me. I may have thought it was a school age crush, but looking back at it, I can't help but wonder... and even hope... it was more.

CHAPTER 2

Ruby

EVERYTHING THAT COULD GO WRONG HAS GONE WRONG. I WAS SUPPOSED to be traveling from New York to Florida yesterday, but I made sure to catch up on all my accounts before I left and had to push my departure back a day. It wasn't a big deal. I'm a hard worker, and since I planned to take the week off—no working—I was willing to do the extra effort to be stress free on my trip. My high school friend is getting married, there are a lot of people I hadn't seen in a while, and for the first time in a long time, I was excited about something.

I finished my work and went to the office to drop off the files I'd worked on all weekend, and that's when my boss told me I couldn't have the week off. I don't know if it was lack of sleep, extreme exhaustion or what, but I told him I was going. I've never, not once since I started working there, even disagreed with him, much less flat-out told him no.

He told me I wasn't going, and so I quit right on the spot. There were no dramatics, yelling, or anything. I packed up my office and took the box all the way across town on the subway to my tiny apartment just to kick it in the door before heading to the airport. None of it sank in until we were up in the air, and then I realized what I'd done. *I just quit my job. The job where I just made junior accountant.*

Thankfully, it wasn't a long flight because the more I thought about it, the more I thought I'd maybe rushed into things. But when I land, I make my way through the airport, pick up my luggage, and head to the shuttle outside.

I try to take in the beautiful scenery and let myself relax during the twenty-minute ride to the hotel, but my thoughts keep going back to what in the hell was I thinking. I don't have the luxury to just quit my job, not without something else lined up.

I take a deep breath, rolling my luggage inside the posh hotel. It's okay. I'll start sending out resumes tonight. I'll have a job before I get back into town Monday. Easy peasy.

I make my way into the hotel and take in the white walls with the dark wood columns. It's a beautiful hotel. I almost make it to the front desk, but a man sitting on a chair at the center of the room has me stumbling over my own feet. He's a cowboy, and my thoughts instantly go to Austin. I shake my head. *It's been seven years, Ruby. Get over it*, I tell myself as I drag my eyes away from the lone figure and step up to the counter.

Check-in is a breeze. I show my ID and am given my keys. I'm putting my wallet back into my purse when I hear my name. My whole body freezes because I know that voice. I've had dreams about that voice. I look up wide-eyed at the man that has haunted my every thought for the last seven years. I can only stare at him open-mouthed and take him all in. He looks good. He's filled out more, and he's sexier than I even remember. He grabs on to his hat and holds it in front of him. "Ruby Sutton."

The way he says my name has me crossing my feet because I swear I feel it all the way to my core. I start and then clear my throat. "Austin McCoy."

He takes a step toward me, and I take a step back. He holds his hand up like he's going to reach out to steady me, but thankfully, he doesn't. I don't know what I'd do if he touched me right now. I've avoided him, his ranch, and Whiskey Valley since I left all those years ago. I never trusted myself to go back. Even when I went to visit my mom and dad in Clover Springs, I was usually in and out in a day—two days—tops. I couldn't chance running into him because I knew I'd be right back where I started, chasing after him. And he's already turned me away once. I'm not going to go through that again.

"You look beautiful, Ruby."

His comment brings me out of my thoughts, and I cross my arms over my chest. "Thank you, Austin. You look good too. What brings you to Florida?"

He hesitates for just a second. "A wedding."

My breath hitches. "You're going to Avery and Gabe's wedding?"

He nods.

We stand here, looking at one another, and I do my best to guard my expression. It doesn't make sense that Austin is here for the wedding. Did he come because Becky is due with her baby soon and couldn't travel? Regardless, I'm not going to ask him about it.

I look around the almost empty lobby and then back at him. "I never did thank you for what you did for my parents. They said they would have lost the ranch without your help."

He grimaces. "They weren't supposed to tell you about it."

I rear back, surprised. Why would he care if I knew about it? Does he think if I knew I'd get hope that there could be something between us? Did he worry I'd start chasing him again? I can't bring myself to ask him. I shake my head. "Well, they did, and whether I was supposed to know or not, I appreciate it." I grab on to my luggage on wheels. "I'd better get to my room. I'll see you on Sunday, Austin."

I barely get two steps and Austin is beside me. "Come and take a walk with me on the beach."

Again I stumble on my feet, and this time, Austin reaches out and holds on to my elbow. I pull from his grip. "I don't think that's a good idea."

I keep walking, my eye on the elevators. I punch the button and stand there, ignoring the man next to me.

When the doors open, I step on, and Austin does the same. I can feel his gaze on me, and I don't even blink, staring at the gray metal doors in front of me.

"Ruby."

I close my eyes and open them. "Yeah?"

"Look at me, honey."

The endearment catches me off guard. I turn my head and look into his dark brown eyes. The hat is back on his head, and I try to ignore the way my heart is racing in my chest. "What?"

"Will you please take a walk with me?"

I blurt the word without even thinking about it. "Why?"

CHAPTER 3

Austin

"WHY?" I REPEAT AFTER HER, STALLING TO ANSWER HER. THERE'S NO way that I can tell her the truth and let her walk away. I did that seven years ago because she was too young and had her whole life in front of her. But I've obsessed over her since. I can't just go back to Whiskey Valley and forget about her. But the way she's looking at me, I know she's not ready to hear any of it. So I decide to go with the truth but not all of it. "Why? Because we were once friends, Ruby. I haven't seen you in seven years. Surely you can take a walk with me and catch up."

She doesn't answer me, and I try to reassure her. "Just take a walk with me. We can come back anytime you want."

She's going to say no. I can see it in her face, and I prepare myself for it. But she surprises me when she says, "Okay. Let me put my bags away."

At that moment, the elevator dings, and the doors open. I motion for her to go ahead of me, and I follow behind her down the hallway to her room. I stand behind her and watch as she opens the door. In an instant, I freeze because she could go in and shut the door between us without a second thought.

I hold my breath as she turns to me, expecting her to do just that. "Do you care if I freshen up a little bit and change clothes?"

I let out a sigh of relief. "Absolutely. That's fine. I'll wait right here." She disappears behind the door, and I stand in front of it, my arms crossed. She can still change her mind, but I know Ruby, and I know that she is not that way. If she says she'll do something, she'll

do it. At least, I keep telling myself that. I wait impatiently and breathe a sigh of relief when I hear her turning the doorknob.

She joins me in the hallway, and I notice that she's changed into shorts and a sleeveless top. Her long hair is up in a ponytail on the top of her head, and I swear she almost looks 18 again. We're both quiet as we go back to the elevator and then down to the first floor again. I point and show her the direction to the back of the hotel and to the beach. We walk side by side, but I don't say anything until we have our shoes off and our feet in the sand. The sun is about to set, and the way it's shining off her red hair it's like she has a halo on her head. "How's your job going?" I ask her.

She shrugs and turns her head away from me, looking out into the ocean. "It's fine."

I nod. "You always were good at numbers."

When she doesn't say anything, I continue, "Becky misses you. She said she hasn't seen you in a while."

She folds her hands together behind her back as we walk. "Yeah, I plan to come and see her when the baby is born. Are you excited about being an uncle?"

It's my turn to shrug. "Yeah, I'm excited. Of course. I never thought that my baby sister would have kids before I did."

Ruby's eyes turned to me. "I didn't know you wanted kids."

Instead of telling her that I've thought about having kids with red hair and green eyes that look just like her, I answer with, "I do."

She's quiet and subdued, nothing like the happy woman that I once knew. She bends and picks up a seashell and holds it in her hand. "How's the ranch?"

"It's good, Ruby. It's probably changed a lot since you were there. You would know if you ever came home."

She releases her hands and lets them swing beside her. "I do come home. I see my mom and dad every few months."

I grimace. That's not what I meant. "At one time, you would've considered the McCoy Ranch your home. You were there enough growing up."

She glances at me, and hurt flares in her eyes before she quickly looks away. "That was before I wasn't welcome anymore."

I stop walking and reach for her, wrapping my hand around her wrist. "You've always been welcome, Ruby, always."

She looks down between us where my hand is holding hers. It makes me wonder if she feels the electricity between us. It's always been there even though I always tried to ignore it. I can't do that now. Some of her hair has escaped from her ponytail, and it's blowing across her face. I wish that I could reach for her and tuck it behind her ear and then cup her jaw and kiss her. But I feel as if I need to tread lightly and not push her in any way, not before we can talk.

I can't get over how beautiful she is. She's ruined me for other women. I haven't even looked at anyone else. And I've stood to the side all this time wanting the best for her, even though now I'm not sure what it is she wants. But I do know after living without her for the last seven years, I will do everything that I can to be the man that she needs.

Gently she pulls her hand back and starts walking. My head drops but not in defeat. I'll never give up again. I follow behind her, and when I catch up to her, she is mad all over again. "You can't say things like that to me, Austin."

I don't even miss a beat. "Why not? It's the truth. You've always been welcome at the McCoy Ranch."

Ruby opens her mouth and then slams it shut again. She seems to be looking everywhere but at me, and then she turns on her heel. "I'm going to go back now."

I don't argue with her. The only thing saving her from having this conversation right now is knowing that I have the next several days to talk to her and hopefully convince her that I am what she needs. I follow her from a distance just to make sure she gets to her room safe.

CHAPTER 4

Ruby

I TOSSED AND TURNED ALL NIGHT LONG. I WOKE BLEARY EYED AND barely made it down in time for breakfast. A few friends were there, and I caught up with them and listened to the gossip that I had missed out on since I got here to the hotel late. Some of them were going to get together today, but I had to beg off with the excuse that I had to work. When in actuality, I spend the whole day searching online for jobs. I've barely gotten one email sent when I receive a reply. It's obvious that my boss has blacklisted me from working anywhere in New York. Reply after reply of corporations telling me they're not interested. I'm not trying to be conceited, but my resume is a good one. Working at the firm that I left should give me a foot in the door with no problem. I spend the rest of the day searching for job openings outside of the downtown New York area. There's no way my boss' reach can be that far.

Morning turns into afternoon and afternoon into evening. I dress carefully for the bachelorette party, and I brush my hair until it shines. I don't use a lot of makeup at the office, but tonight I apply eye liner and mascara, giving my eyes a smoky look, and I swipe on a red shade of lipstick. My skirt is the shortest thing I've worn in a long time, but the itinerary said club attire. I had nothing that would work and had to go shopping last week. Looking at myself in the mirror, I don't look like me. I'm used to wearing suit jackets and pumps, not short skirts and heels.

I take a deep breath. The woman at the boutique said it was perfect, and I adjust my off-the-shoulder top before grabbing my

purse. I turn side to side and decide to be brave. I look different, but I feel confident.

I've done my best to not think about Austin, but I'm learning that I need to give that up. It's been seven years, and not a day goes by that I don't think about him. I don't know why I thought I could stop now, especially after seeing him and knowing he could pop up around a corner at any minute. He's staying in this hotel, and the whole way downstairs, I wonder if I'll run into him again before Sunday.

I keep my head down as I walk through the lobby and get into the car. I ride over with Avery, the bride to be, Brielle, the maid of honor, and Emma, one of our old friends from Clover Springs. Everyone is laughing and giggling. I do my best to join in with them and let my worries go.

As soon as I get into the Wave Nightclub, I pull Sadie to the side. She's an old friend from Clover Springs, and I tug her into my arms with a big hug. "I'm so sorry about your grandma." Her grandma passed a few months ago, and I look at her guiltily now since I hadn't seen her since the funeral.

She looks at me almost with tears in her eyes. "Thank you, Ruby." I hug her again, and she waves her hand in front of her face like she's trying to pull herself together. I decide now would be a good time to change the subject. "I still can't believe Avery is the first of all of our friends to get married."

She laughs and nods with me. I wave at Lottie, another friend from high school. I hear that she's making the wedding cake, which I already know is going to be amazing. She's made a name for herself with her baking skills.

Someone buys drinks, and before I know it, it's like old times. We dance and drink and have a good time. When we walk off the dance floor, I pull Sadie to my side. "This morning at breakfast, some of the girls were talking about you and Miles. What's going on with that?" The truth is I'm pretty sure Miles liked Sadie in high school, even though to my knowledge, they never went out. Sadie's face turns red, and she doesn't answer me. I laugh at the blush on her cheeks. I want to ask her more about it, but I don't. The band starts playing a slow song, and there's a peck on my shoulder. I turn and look, and there's a man standing next to us, looking at me expectantly. "Want to dance?"

I should say no. There's not one part of me that wants to dance with this man. I compare him to Austin, just like I've done to every other man these last seven years, and this guy doesn't even hold a candle to the McCoy cowboy that has a starring role in all my nighttime dreams. But obviously, I need to do something different because I'm going to go crazy like this. I have to quit pining for someone I can't have.

I open my mouth to say yes when Austin sweeps in and stands between the guy and me.

"Dance with me." He says it as a command and not a question. Speechless, I stare up at him. Where did he even come from? And even though I don't give him an answer, he grabs on to my hand and pulls me toward the dance floor. I can only imagine what Sadie and the other girls are all thinking. They all know Austin, and I'm sure nobody is as surprised as I am when he stops on the dance floor and wraps his arms around my waist, pulling me against him.

I look up at him, searching his eyes. His cowboy hat offers a shadow, and it's hard to see what he is thinking. "What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be at the bachelor party?"

His hands tighten at my waist, pulling me closer to him. "I wanted to be here."

I look around the modern club and then back at him. It doesn't seem like his kind of thing. "Really? At The Wave? Is this the type of place you hang out at now?"

He smiles at that. "Honey, you know me better than that. If it doesn't have a jukebox or peanut shells on the floor, it's probably not my type of place."

Being this close to him has my whole body tense and on high alert. When my breast grazes against his chest, I pull back a little, not wanting him to feel the evidence of my arousal. He has no clue what being this close to him does to me. A part of me wonders, *What's he even doing and why is he doing this? Does he enjoy torturing me?*

The song ends, and I can't get off the dance floor fast enough. I make my way across the bar and order a shot of tequila. Austin stops next to me, crowding me. The heat from his body affects me. And when the drink is set in front of me, I drink it fast, letting the cold liquid burn down my throat. "Another one," I order. The bartender smiles and gives me a wink before pouring the shot and setting it in front of me. I hold it up to Austin, asking him if he wants some, and

when he shakes his head side to side, I down it too and slam the glass onto the bar top in front of me. Austin pulls his wallet out and lays the bills out on the bar.

"I can pay for my own drinks," I tell him.

He puts his hand on the money to keep it there. "I know you can, but I want to buy them for you."

I put my hand on my hip and look up at him. I had a few drinks earlier, and these shots are already starting to affect me. "What are you even doing here, Austin? I mean, I'm serious."

He looks almost guilty when he replies, "I showed up here in Florida at the hotel, and when Avery's dad found out I was here for the week, he invited me to the wedding."

I cross my arms over my chest and wait for him to continue. "Okaaaay... So what are you doing in Florida?"

I hold my breath waiting for his answer. I swear if he tells me that he's here with a woman, I'm going to throw up right here on his cowboy boots.

He leans down and looks me straight into the eye. "I came for you."

CHAPTER 5

Austin

"YOU CAME FOR ME?" SHE SQUEAKS.

Surprise, insecurity, fear. All of the emotions light up her face before she says, "I need to get some air."

I nod and step back from her. I watch as she walks over to the table where her friends are at. She grabs her purse out of the booth, and I see her pointing to where I'm standing. All eyes go to me. I wait for the judgmental looks, but all I see are smiles on their faces.

When she walks back toward me, I hold my hand out toward her. She grabs on to it, and I swear I want to pump my fist in the air right there. It's only a small thing, but it seems like such a big step for the two of us. I make my way through the crowded room, and people part as we walk by them. I get a lot of stares, but what Ruby said earlier is true: I really don't fit into a place like this.

When we get outside, I let her pull me to the side of the building. She stops. And I stop too. She stands in front of me, toe to toe. I breathe in her sweet vanilla scent. I swear it's like coming home again. Her hands start at my waist and climb to the swell of my chest. Her breaths are coming in and out in little pants.

I suck in a breath, loving the feel of her hands on me. Her eyes never leave mine. She's wide-eyed, looking up at me. "If I kiss you, Austin, are you going to push me away again?"

"No, honey. I'd die about now to just have your lips on mine."

I don't know who moves first. It seems like we both do at the same time. She goes on her tip-toes, and I reach down, our lips mashing together like a union I've never felt before. My hands stroke

up and down her back before moving to each of her ass cheeks and squeezing her there. It's too much, too fast, but how can I resist?

She's on me as if she's climbing a ladder, and I lift her up into my arms as her legs wrap around my waist. This is so much more than a kiss. I should have known it would be like this. I should stop, but I can't. I've wanted her for seven long damn years. Her hips flex against mine, and my hard cock hits her right at her center. She pushes into me, gyrating her hips back and forth.

The thick material of my jeans and the thin material of her skirt are the only things between us stopping me from taking her right now. That thought, knowing that we're here at a club where anyone can see her, has me drawing back. I let her body slide down mine, and she's staring back at me with wide eyes and swollen lips. Her hands go to her mouth. "I want to go back to the hotel."

Big fat rain drops start to fall, and there is a bolt of lightning that races through the sky. I pull Ruby with me. She seems nervous as I pull her toward my rental car, and my stomach drops. *Please, tell me I didn't just fuck this up.* I had planned to just be here in case she needed me, but when I saw the preppy guy in the loafers walking toward her, I knew I had to do something. There's no way I could just stand by while she danced with another man.

I help her inside and try to calm myself as I get around the car and into the driver's side. She is quiet the whole way, and I try and concentrate with the windshield wipers on high. It's a short drive, but she doesn't say a thing. I can feel her eyes on me, but I don't say a word. I'm on edge, and it wouldn't take much for her to pull me over, for us to do something that we would never be able to take back.

When we get to the hotel, I walk her to her room. After three tries of using her key card, she finally gets the door open and stumbles in, holding it open. "Are you going to come in?"

I dig my hands into the front pockets of my jeans. If I thought pushing her away when she was 18 was hard, this has to be the second hardest thing I've ever done in my life. "No."

She is shocked. That's the only way to describe it. Her eyes round, and her mouth falls open before she starts to stutter. "No? No! What do you mean no? Is this a game to you, Austin? You let me kiss you and then turn me away?"

She looks so hurt, and that was never my plan. I never want to hurt her, but I got myself into this, and I don't know how to stop it. "Let me explain, Ruby. You've been drinking."

She puts her hand on the wall next to the door to steady herself. "I'm over 21, Austin. I don't see what the big deal is."

I'm still standing in the hallway. It's late, and I definitely don't want to wake up everyone on the floor.

I lean in and tell her thickly, "The big deal is, Ruby, that when we make love, I want you to be sober for it. I want you to remember every fucking thing about it. I don't want there to be any doubt in your mind that this, me, I am what you want. That's the big deal."

She looks up at me, stunned. I've never been a person that cusses a lot, so maybe it's my use of the F word, or maybe it's the words themselves. But she backs into the room. "You know what, Austin McCoy? You're a tease. That's what you are."

She slams the door in my face. I stare at it, fighting temptation to knock on it and push my way in and take her anyway. I know I'm doing the right thing, even though it's hard. I fucked up, but I can't have one night with her. Not when I want forever.

CHAPTER 6

Ruby

I SLEEP IN AGAIN. I SWEAR IT'S LIKE I'M USING THIS WEEK TO CATCH UP on all of my sleep. When I wake up, I'm hungover, mad, and frustrated. I go straight to my laptop, and I have four more emails of "thanks, but no thanks." Before I do something stupid like call up my ex-boss and give him a piece of my mind, I make plans for the day.

Some of the girls are going on a spa day, but I decide not to join them. I need to start saving money, it seems, seeing as how I no longer have any income coming in. I have savings that will last me for a while, but the thought of dipping into that makes me nervous. I shower, put on my bathing suit, pack my bag with sunscreen, a granola bar, and a smutty romance novel, and head out to the beach.

After finding a spot away from people, I coat my pale white skin in sunscreen and read for a little while before dropping the book to the sand next to me and laying my head back on the chair. I don't know how long I'm there before a shadow falls over me. I don't even have to open my eyes to know it's Austin. It's like my body reacts anytime he's within a 10-foot radius. I open one eye and look up at him. He's bare-chested, and his hat is nowhere to be seen. I pull my sunglasses from the top of my head down to my face so he can't see the desire that I'm trying to hide. In a frustrated voice, I ask him, "What are you doing here? You're blocking the sun."

He sits down on the chair next to me. "Are you still mad at me for last night?"

I grit my teeth, hating that he's throwing that up at me. "Yeah, I'm still mad. I'm also done throwing myself at you only to be rejected

over and over again."

"Do it now."

It's only three words, but I know that I didn't hear him right. I roll my head to the side and look at him. "Do what now?"

He leans forward, putting his elbows on his knees. "Throw yourself at me." He says it like a dare or a challenge, and I let my head roll away from him.

"No thank you," I answer.

I feel so exposed with him hovering next to me. I can feel his gaze go up and down my body, and my nipples pucker at his perusal. His voice is gruff. "You may be mad at me, but your body says otherwise."

I almost bring my hands up to cover my breasts, but I decide not to. Screw him. I don't need to hide my reaction to him. I pretty much begged him to have sex with me last night, and he turned me down. I do give him a little huff and then continue ignoring him.

When his hand lands on my bare waist, my whole body jerks at the contact. I look at him out of the corner of my eye, and he scoots his chair closer to mine. His hand is right under the swell of my breast, and I'm secretly hoping that he moves it up and covers me. His fingers stroke back and forth across my bare skin.

He leans down closer, his voice at my ear. "I stopped last night because you had been drinking. I didn't want you to regret this. I wanted to know... I needed to know that it's you and not the alcohol talking."

I want to call him out and ask him how he could not know that I want him. I've thrown myself at him over and over. He has to know how I feel about him. His hands continue to stroke along my midriff. "When is your next wedding activity?"

My mind draws a blank, and I shake my head. He does this to me. He makes me crazy. "I skipped the spa day. The next event is Saturday night at the rehearsal dinner."

"Good," he answers immediately. "Spend the next few days with me."

I swallow hard. It's like I'm in a parallel universe, as if everything I've ever wanted is right within reach, and all I have to do is put my hand out to take it. But it can't be that easy. Am I falling for his game again? But I still can't resist asking. "Spend the next few days with you doing what?"

His hand moves up just a little, and I swear his finger is stroking back and forth right at the very edge of my nipple. My body is like a magnet drawn to him. It wouldn't take anything to move just a fraction of an inch to have his hand where I want it.

I can hear the smile in his voice as he answers me. "Getting to know each other, dinner, dancing, whatever you want to do."

I don't care that I'm on a crowded beach and there's probably people around that I know. None of that matters right now. I lift my arm and cover Austin's hand with my own. I look at him through my tinted lens, and he's staring where our hands are touching one another. I take three deep breaths and then pull his hand up to cover my breast. Instantly, he palms me and squeezes my fullness.

I lift my glasses with my other hand and look him right in the eye. "Whatever I want to do?"

CHAPTER 7

Austin

SHE'S TOO TEMPTING. THAT'S THE ONLY THING I THINK AS I SQUEEZE MY hand on her breast. "Yes. Anything you want," I answer her.

Her voice is all deep and thick. "What about you? What do you want?"

I flick my forefinger across her nipple and circle it. The moan that comes out of her mouth is deep. "I think we want the same things."

She sits up suddenly, and I reluctantly release her. She turns, putting her hands on my knees, opening my legs so she can fit hers between mine. She leans toward me, and her green eyes are daring me. "Kiss me," she says.

I look around the beach, and there are people everywhere, children building sandcastles and families together hanging out. But when I look back at her, I can't bring myself to say no. "You want to start this here?" I ask instead.

Her hands slide from my knees to my thighs, and my muscles flex under her palms. "No more excuses, Austin. You want me, prove it. There's no holding back."

I put my hands at her waist and lift her up onto my lap. Her legs go around my waist, and I press my lips to hers. Just like last night, our kiss goes from sweet and simple to an inferno in an instant. Her heated core is pressed against my hard cock. The shorts I have on do nothing to hide the desire that I feel for her. My hands are everywhere, across her shoulders, down her back, massaging her ass, and then back again. It's only when she whimpers that I pull away. No one should hear her, no one but me. I'm frustrated beyond

measure, and I lean my forehead against hers breathlessly. "Oh, the things I want to do to you."

She shifts in my lap. "Just do it."

I groan. "That's just it, Ruby. Nothing will stop me now. I've thought about you, I've thought about this for seven years. Once we go there, there's no turning back. You're going to be mine."

She moans in response, "Yes. Yes to all of that." Her hips grind against mine, and I swear I'm so close to spurting cum into my shorts.

I cup her face and look into her eyes. "I know this is a lot to ask, but I want to wait."

Her eyes open wide in shock. She puts her hands on my shoulder and tries to push herself off of me, but I don't let her. I hold on to her tightly, grinding her against my swollen manhood. It's torture, but I won't let her go. "Listen to me, Ruby. There's only one thing I want, and that's you. I will take you up to my room right now and prove that to you. But it's important to me that we do this right. You don't trust me, and I can't say that I blame you."

She starts to deny it, but I don't let her. "Honey, the shit I put you through, hell, the shit I put us through, I don't blame you for not trusting me. But I need there to be trust between us when it happens."

She shakes her head. "This is crazy, Austin. You could take me upstairs right now and put me out of my fucking misery."

The fact that she's cussing tells me exactly what she's thinking and how she's feeling. She's right: I could take her upstairs and put us both out of our misery, but who's to say she won't walk away afterwards? There's no way I can let that happen. "Date me, Ruby. I want us to spend time together, getting to know each other again. I know it's a lot to ask, but will you do this for me?"

She looks at me with insecurity. "I'm telling you, Austin, if this is a game—"

I don't even hesitate in reassuring her, "I promise you no games. This week is going to be about me and you. That's all that matters to me."

I expect her to deny me, but she doesn't. She puts her hands around the base of my neck. "But we can still kiss, right?"

I laugh and smile widely at her. "Yeah, honey, we can still kiss," I murmur before I dip my head and press my lips to hers. These next

few days are going to be the best days of my life, I just know it.

CHAPTER 8

Ruby

FOR THE LAST TWO AND A HALF DAYS, AUSTIN HAS DONE HIS BEST TO woo me. Dinner, dancing, and walks along the beach. He has spent every second with me from the time I get up, usually surprising me with breakfast and then until I go to sleep at night. He's asked me a gazillion questions, some I know he knows the answer to, but I've answered all of them.

The kisses have continued, but I want more. I've learned that Austin is very disciplined. He said kisses, and that's what he meant. That's why I've invited him to my room before the rehearsal dinner. He's not going, and it will be weird not having him with me. Already, I'm accustomed to being with him. I don't know what I'll do on Monday when I leave.

I shake my head, trying to clear out the sad thoughts. I can't think about Monday and leaving Austin.

I look at myself in the bathroom mirror. I stare at my red hair that is in curls down my back. My face is still makeup free, and I have an hour to get downstairs. I grab two dresses off the hook and open the bathroom door.

I put the most innocent look on my face and walk out in nothing but my bra and panties, with the outfits hanging from my finger. "All right, so which do you think?" I hold up one outfit. "Slutty black dress?" and then I hold up the other. "Or the blue one?"

I look at him, expecting an answer, but what I see stops me in my tracks. Even from across the room, his gaze is boring into me. I toss the outfits onto the chair. "Or I can go like this and shock them all," I say with a laugh, pointing at my matching black panties and bra.

He's up and across the room in an instant. His hands go to my hips, and his fingers run across the soft, satiny material of my panties. His breathing is heavy as his chest falls and expands with each intake of breath. "No to the slutty dress and definitely no to the bra and panties. Unless you want me to gouge out the eyes of every man that looks at you."

My hands go up to his chest and circle around his neck. "Ooh, possessive, I like it."

His hands stroke up my back. "You're not playing fair, Ruby."

I press into him, loving the feel of his big, hard body against mine. "No, what's not fair is wanting you and not having you. That's not fair."

I don't even try to keep the pout off my face. These last couple of days have been perfect in most ways but tortuous in others.

He brushes his hand across my hair and tips my chin up so I'm looking right at him. "You need me to take the edge off, baby?"

I bite on to my lower lip in anticipation, and he continues. "I think it's only right, Ruby." His hand goes down my side, to my hip, and then rolls around to my front and cups my pussy. "Since I'm not going with you, if I make you come, will you be thinking of me as you walk through the rehearsals and have your dinner?"

I moan as he presses his thick finger against the wet spot of my panties. My hips flex toward him, pushing myself into his hand. He continues stroking me, and I grip his arms in my hands, already close to orgasm.

He stops, and a moan of denial escapes me before he puts one arm behind my back and the other behind my knees and lifts me up. His eyes are on me the whole time he walks toward the bed, and then he lays me gently across it.

He stands up, staring down at me hungrily. His fingers dip into each side of my panties, and he pulls them down my hips and legs and drops them to the floor at his feet. "Know what's fair, baby? Having you on my tongue before you go. It's only right that I get to eat too, and there's only one thing I want."

I suck in a deep, strangled breath. "Yeah?"

He nods. "Yeah." He reaches between my legs, stroking through my wet, swollen folds. My feet hit the mattress, and I push my lower body into his hand. He leans down, and when his mouth covers me, he moans as if he's savoring me. His tongue and lips are relentless,

bringing me to the edge and then stopping. Each time, he gets me closer, and I'm pulling his hair, lifting my hips, practically begging him for it.

He pulls away, taking a deep breath. "You need to come, don't you, baby?"

"Yes," I moan.

"Say my name. I need you to say my name, Ruby."

"AAAUUSTIN!!" I bellow in a guttural howl.

He does it then. He takes me over the edge, and my whole body tenses into one big ball of muscle. I jerk, and he doesn't stop. "Give it to me, Ruby. I want it all."

No longer able to fight it, I give in to the climax. It rocks me to my very core, and I know that right now, my life will never be the same.

I lie back on the bed, and Austin raises up, licking his lips. He's smiling at me smugly, and he points to the clock on the wall. "You have twenty minutes to get downstairs."

I raise up. "Twenty minutes?"

He nods, and I jump up. My legs about give out on me, and he grabs me by the waist. "Wow."

His smile gets even bigger. "My thoughts exactly."

I reach up and kiss him and pat his cheek. "I wish you were going with me."

He reaches down and adjusts himself. He's hard, it's obvious he needs relief too. "I can..."

He doesn't let me finish. "No way, honey. You have somewhere to be."

I look at him regretfully. "But..."

He leans over and picks up the blue dress and hands it to me. "No buts. You're going to this rehearsal and being the good friend you are. But when you come back, all bets are off, Ruby. I can't wait any longer. Tonight, you're going to be mine."

My whole body vibrates. I would skip this in an instant, but I know I can't. I grab the dress from his hands and start tugging it on. "I'll be quick. As soon as it's over, I'll be back."

His hand goes to mine. "There's no need to rush, Ruby. I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to be waiting on you."

I let out a whoosh of breath. "Okay."

CHAPTER 9

Austin

AS SOON AS SHE'S READY, I WALK HER TO THE BACK OF THE HOTEL where the wedding rehearsal is going to take place. I can't resist kissing her before she makes her way to her friends. I should go back upstairs to the room and give her some space, but instead, I lean against the wall and watch from the shadows.

Ruby is beautiful. She's laughing with her friends, and they all hug when the rehearsal is over. I watch from afar as they go in another door to go to the small event room where the dinner is being held.

It's crazy, but I sit down in the lobby and wait for her. She lives in New York, and I have no doubt that she can take care of herself, but I can't get over the thought that she doesn't have to. From now on, I want to be the one to take care of her.

I call my cousins to check on my ranch. I check my emails and waste time looking at my phone. As if I sense her being near, I lift my head, and she's walking out of the event room. I stand up, and her eyes light up when she sees me.

"Have you been here the whole time?"

I nod, speechless. She's absolutely lit up, and her beauty is too much for me.

She puts her hand on her hip and holds out a small box to me. "I thought you were going to eat, but I brought you some food just in case."

I stare into her eyes. "I'm not hungry... for food."

It takes a second, but she finally gets my meaning. "Oh," she mutters, her mouth forming a perfect circle.

I reach for her, and she walks straight into my arms. I kiss her as if I haven't seen her for ages, but I'm quickly finding out that any time apart from Ruby is too long.

She pulls back and grabs on to my hand, pulling me toward the elevators. We both stare at the numbers, and when it dings its arrival, we walk on, hand in hand.

I pull her to me, her back to my front, and wrap my arms around her. The elevator seems to take forever.

"Uh, Austin, I probably need to tell you something."

The hesitancy in her voice has me freezing up behind her. "What is it?"

She turns in my arms. She's still holding the box of food, and she puts her free hand on my chest. "I think... I mean, I'm guessing you'll find out anyway, but I should probably..."

I lock my hands at her back, prepared for anything. "Spill it, Ruby. You can tell me anything."

"Uh, this is my first time..." she blurts in a hurry.

I thought I was prepared for anything, but the truth is, I wasn't prepared for that. I haven't let myself think of her with anyone else, and now knowing that she's saved herself for me has the blood roaring in my ears.

The elevator dings, and I pull her down the hallway with me. I pull my key from my pocket and let us in. I pull the box out of her hand and toss it onto the desk before lifting her up in my arms and moving to the chair in the corner of the room.

I sit down with her in my lap, and she curls up like she belongs there. "Say something," she mutters, her face flushed.

"Do you want this, Ruby? I mean, do you want me to be your first?"

I hold my breath and wait for her answer. Truth is, I'll be her last too. I'm never letting her go.

She leans in. "Yes. I want you to be my first, Austin. You... are what I want."

I exhale roughly. *Keep it together, McCoy.*

That's what I tell myself, but I know it's a losing battle. Truth is, Ruby is the only woman that is able to make me lose control.

I kiss her cheeks, her eyes, her lips. "You deserve candy and roses... candlelight... you deserve the best, Ruby."

She pulls back and cups her hands around my neck. "You're right... I do. I deserve you."

Emotion hits me in my chest.

Ruby is done waiting, though, and she stands up from my lap and starts to remove her clothes. I sit here and watch her until she's completely naked. When she drops to her knees in front of me, I pull her by her arms and lift her up. "No, honey. As much as I want your mouth on me, I can't wait to get inside you."

She doesn't argue; she just grabs me by the hand. "I can't wait either."

I pull myself up and walk with her to the bed. My hands are all over her, touching her, caressing her. She's still wet and swollen from earlier, and the need to have her intensifies. I undress quickly and lay her back on the bed.

Her legs part, and I climb up between her thighs, sitting on my knees. I stroke myself, wrapping my hand around my girth and working my cock from root to tip. Already, precum is oozing from my tip.

I slide my cock along her wet folds, hitting her clit with each small thrust. She moans, and I do it again.

I line myself up at her entrance and push softly inside her. She tightens around me, her pussy like a vise. "Yes," she moans.

Sweat forms on my forehead. Never in a million years did I dream it would be like this. I push a little farther and give her time to adjust.

She's biting her lip, and I lean forward, brushing my thumb across her lip soothingly. "You okay?"

She nods and lifts her pelvis a little, pushing me deeper inside her. "Aaah!" I groan, unable to hold back.

She smiles at me with a smirk. "Are you okay?"

I lean forward and kiss her. "I'll be even better when I'm balls deep inside you."

She gives me a challenging look. "You won't hurt me, Austin. Do it. Take me and make me yours."

Make me yours. Her words echo in my head until there's no holding back. I reach for her swollen clit and rub it as I work my way deeper inside her. She's so tight, but damn she feels good.

"Yes," she groans, and when another orgasm hits her, she locks down on me as I push the rest of the way in. I pull back and thrust

again, the friction powerful and intense.

“Take me, Ruby. Take all of me,” I tell her, and she does just that. I root in and out of her, groaning her name, kissing her lips and don’t stop until I’ve come, filling her with my seed.

CHAPTER 10

Ruby

THE DAY HAS BEEN A CRAZY ONE. I WOULD'VE GIVEN ANYTHING TO STAY in bed all day with Austin, but I didn't have that choice. It's been hair appointments and my duties as a bridesmaid that have kept me busy. I almost asked him when I walked out of the hotel room this morning what our future, if any, would be like, but I didn't have the guts. Last night was amazing. I thought so, anyway.

I do everything on autopilot, and it's not until I'm walking down the aisle to find my spot at the front that I catch Austin out of the corner of my eye. The whole ceremony, my eyes are on him, and when they pronounce Avery and Gabe husband and wife and the crowd cheers as they kiss, I am finally drawn back to the present. After more pictures, I find my way to the reception and go straight to Austin. I leave to go back to New York tomorrow. There's been no more talk of what will happen then, and my heart stutters with sadness.

We are dancing, his chin resting on the top of my head. "How big is your apartment?"

I clench my eyes closed in relief. "Are you going to come and visit me?"

He puts his hands on each side of my neck, forcing me to look up at him. "Honey, I'm coming to stay. I don't want to be away from you."

And I realize that I still haven't told him about my job. "I quit my job, Austin. They didn't want to give me this week off, even after they had approved it. So I quit. Now it seems that my boss has

blacklisted me, and I'm probably going to end up moving back to Clover Springs."

He shakes his head side to side. "Don't do that."

That wasn't the reaction that I wanted. I hoped that he would be excited that I was moving back to the town right next to where he lives, but maybe that's not the case.

His hands tighten on me. "Move to Whiskey Valley. Move to the McCoy Ranch."

I gasp in surprise. "Your ranch?"

He nods, almost excitedly. "I need someone to take over my office. It's a mess."

My heart starts to deflate. "You're offering me a job," I deadpan.

He shakes his head. "No, I mean, damn, I'm fucking this up."

He pulls my hand and guides me off the dance floor. We walk up the sandy beach to the back of the hotel where there's an alcove, and he pulls me into it so we can have some privacy. When he stops, he leans me back against the wall and stares down at me with so much regret on his face. "Seven years ago, I fucked up, Ruby. I wanted you. I wanted everything with you, but I knew you had your whole future ahead of you. I couldn't hold you back, no matter how much I wanted you. I haven't looked at another woman because I knew no one would compare to you. I don't want you to come back to Whiskey Valley unless that's what you want to do. Whatever makes you happy, that's what I want. But just know this, wherever you decide to go, I'm going to be right there with you, right by your side."

Emotion wells up inside of me. I grab on to the lapels of his jacket and pull him down to me. "Austin, we've wasted so much time. I wanted you then. I want you now. I want to be with you. Don't you know that even when I was 18 years old, you were what my dreams were made of? Only you."

"I'm here now, Ruby, and I want to make up the last seven years to you. I promise you that I'm going to be the man that you need."

With a tear falling down my cheek, I laugh and smile. "You already are, Austin."

He kisses me until I'm breathless, and when he pulls back, he searches my face. "Nothing has to be decided right now, Ruby. All I need is a promise from you... Promise me that from this point

forward, we do life together. I'll never have to wake up without you by my side."

I lean up on my tiptoes and pull his head down to me. "I was yours when I was 18, Austin. I'm always going to be yours."

He grunts. "Hell yeah, you are."

I laugh, and he kisses me again. My worries about tomorrow are forgotten because now there's the promise of forever with Austin.

Hope Ford Books and Bio

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USA Today Bestselling Author Hope Ford writes short, steamy, sweet romances. She loves tattooed, alpha men, instant love stories, and ALWAYS happily ever afters. She has over 100 books and they are all available on Amazon

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Miles & Sadie

HANNAH MCBRIDE

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Chapter One

MILES

I KICKED THE DOOR TO MY SUITE SHUT WITH A GROAN, BARELY ABLE TO appreciate the open balcony doors framed by gauzy white drapes that billowed in the fresh salty sea air. Twelve hours on a plane so I could jet from one wedding to the next wasn't exactly how I'd planned to spend the first few weeks of June, but apparently it was the season for love.

Avery and Gabe's wedding had been in the works for a while. It still amused the hell out of me that somehow my stepbrother's best friend, a guy who had been like a brother to me, was marrying a girl I'd grown up with. I was happy that they'd found each other, but they weren't the only ones.

Two of my teammates had decided the best time to get married was the month before we all reported to training camp in July, and somehow my ass was blessed to be a groomsman in all the weddings.

Maybe it wouldn't have been a big deal, if Aidan's fiancée hadn't convinced him to get married on a tiny island in Fiji while Sean's family had insisted he get married in the same Dublin cathedral where his parents and grandparents had exchanged vows.

I'd spent the better part of the last two weeks on airplanes that, while spacious, really weren't designed for professional athletes. The lie-flat seats the airlines boasted for overnight flights might have worked if I wasn't pushing five inches past six feet tall. Hunter, my agent, gave me shit that, since I'd signed a multi-year contract with the Phoenix Dragons football team last season, I could've afforded to

charter my own damn plane, but I'd come from a small town where money wasn't something to be thrown around on a whim.

Besides, if my family and friends found out that I'd shown up in Florida on a private airplane, I'd never have heard the end of it.

I dropped my suitcase by the door and looked around the spacious suite. The massive king bed with white linens and a mountain of pillows was calling my name, but before I could consider falling onto it, the lock at my back beeped. A second later, the door shoved open, hitting my spine as someone let themselves in.

"Freaking *finally*." The stressed-but-chipper voice of my twin sister was equal parts welcome and unwanted.

I turned with a rueful smile, my gaze sweeping over Emma. "Purple, huh? What happened to the green?"

She absently lifted a hand and touched the streak of vibrant color in her otherwise jet-black hair. "I switched it for the wedding." A wicked glint entered her eyes. "Besides, I only went with green to support the Dragons last season and... you lost, remember, little brother?"

I rolled my eyes with a huff, still annoyed that our team had lost the previous season to the Philadelphia Kings early in the playoffs. But our roster had been hit hard by injuries that sidelined a lot of our best players. There was only so much you could do when only a third of your best players could set foot on the turf.

"You're only eight minutes older," I muttered, shaking my head.

"And infinitely wiser," she mocked with a grin.

Looking at her now, I saw that Emma was in full business mode, from the skirt and blouse down to the clipboard I knew housed all the details of this week's activities. She'd left Clover Springs like I had years earlier and had steadily made a name for herself as an elite wedding planner in New York City.

But I could still see the girl who'd gotten me into trouble all our lives shimmering under the surface. The impish glint in her green eyes, identical to mine, was always present, although right now it was nearly smothered by stress.

"You're late," she snapped, brushing past me into the room. She paused in the center, looking around and making notes on her clipboard. Her shoulders relaxed when her gaze landed on a garment bag hanging on the closet door.

"Try that on so we know if you need any last-minute alterations," she ordered, almost absently. "I'll have—"

I groaned, my head falling back. "Emmy, chill."

She turned and scowled at me, hating the nickname as much as I loved using it. "Seriously? Since when has saying *chill* ever helped someone relax?"

"Point taken," I allowed with a smile, but her agitation and worry was rubbing off on me. Call it a twin thing or whatever, but our moods always seemed to influence each other. Mom had complained that, when we were babies, if one of us cried, the other started. If one of us giggled, the other burst into laughter.

And right now? My sister could use some laughter.

"Em, take a breath. You're planning our friends' wedding. That should make things *less* stressful," I pointed out gently. Emma had been friends with Avery since we were in diapers.

Her face fell a bit, and I felt like shit. "No, Miles. That means things *have* to be perfect."

"They will be," I assured her, putting my hands on her shoulders. "You've got this, Emma. What can I do to help?"

She tilted her face up and looked at me with a smile I knew meant trouble. "Try on the suit like *I already asked?*"

"Fine." I relented and changed in the bathroom, then came out so she could fuss over the lines of the suit in person until she was satisfied I hadn't gained or lost an inch since I'd had the suit originally fitted back in Phoenix two months ago.

Once I'd changed again into shorts and a plain white shirt, I came back into the room and glanced at the clock on the nightstand. "Have you eaten?"

She shook her head. "No. I will later. I have to reconfirm the cake delivery—"

"Emaline," I snapped, catching her attention by using the same tone that helped bring my offensive line back into formation after a play went rogue. "Stop and eat. I'm starving, too, okay? The wedding won't fall apart if you take a thirty-minute break. And isn't Lottie making the cake?"

Charlotte, aka Lottie, had grown up with us and had her own vlog or blog or something. Emma had told me about the incredible cake she was supposed to be making at some point over the last few weeks when venting about all that a destination wedding entailed,

but I'd kind of tuned her out because she was doing that thing where she just needed someone to hear her talk through all possible scenarios.

Damn, my sister liked to talk. A fucking lot.

God save the man who finally locked her ass down.

Emma sighed and nodded reluctantly. "Yeah. And Lottie's amazing, but if the staff here fucks up the presentation to the bride and groom—"

"—heads will roll," I finished for her. "But can you complete global bridal domination *after* you're fed? Because we both know that things get ugly when you're hangry."

Her lips flattened in a mulish line that told me she was about to argue, but then she suddenly relented and nodded. "Fine. Food first. And *then* I'll confirm with the catering staff. When I'm done with that, I need to make sure Rhys finished his best man speech. And I swear to God, Miles, I may kill him if he hasn't."

I hid a smirk. I'd frequently played mediator between our stepbrother and Emma growing up. The six-year age difference between Rhys and us hadn't kept us from being close, but while Rhys was my best friend, I knew Emma made it her mission in life to drive his buttoned-up-ass crazy.

She'd been blasting punk rock music while he'd been writing a speech to run for student body president. Even now, Rhys had been talking about running for mayor of NYC.

"Rhys could give a speech in his sleep, Em." I grabbed the phone from the desk and quickly placed a room service order, not bothering to ask her what she wanted. The day my sister turned down a bacon cheeseburger was the day I retired from football. "Why don't you stop worrying and put down the clipboard?" I shot her a winning smile. "I'll show you pictures of Sean's wedding, and you can pick apart all the things their planner did wrong."

She set the clipboard on the bed with a grumble and held out her hand for my phone. "Fine."

I managed to corral her on the balcony while we waited for our food, and as she sat on one of the plush loungers, I sucked in a deep breath of clean air.

I loved the beach. There was something soothing about the rhythmic pounding of the waves on the shore as seagulls chirped

overhead. It reminded me of family vacations before we'd all scattered to separate corners of the world.

Well, Rhys and Emma had both gone to New York. Our families had stayed in Tennessee. I was the one who was in Arizona, on the other side of the country. But I'd fallen in love with the West Coast when I'd played at Huntingdon University in Oregon. When I'd signed with Hunter, my first contract had brought me to the Midwest, but when the Dragons had been looking for a new wide receiver last year, it had been an easy sell for them, and for me to move back where *snow* was a four-letter-word.

But it sucked being far away from my family.

I wandered to the railing, bracing my forearms on the white ledge while staring at the people dotting the beach.

The Sun Palace was one of the larger resorts in the Florida Keys, and I, for one, was grateful for the privacy it afforded. Public recognition wasn't something I was too worried about, but the team's publicist was constantly hammering into us how one mistake could derail the public image of the whole organization. Aidan's and Sean's weddings both had been public spectacles with paparazzi showing up to document whatever they could.

Avery and Gabe were successful, but their business wasn't plastered across the tabloids, so the odds of being photographed while I tossed back shots at the bachelor party in a couple days were slim.

Thank fuck for that.

Behind me, Emma snorted at something in a photo. "*Fake flowers?*"

I glanced back with a bemused smile. "The maid of honor had allergies."

Emma shot me a look. "I get that, but these *look* fake."

I let it go with a laugh, not sure why it mattered if fake flowers looked fake or not as my gaze drifted up and down the beach before snagging on someone sitting alone on the shore.

Leaning forward, I squinted as something about the woman kept my attention. She looked so damn familiar. Too familiar.

Holy shit.

"Em, is that..." No way.

Emma stood up and joined me at the railing. "Sadie James? Yeah."

The name rocked through me like a lightning strike. I hadn't thought about Sadie James since high school, when we'd lived to drive each other crazy. She'd grown up down the street from us but had been that awkward outsider who hung around because she was Avery's cousin.

It was cliché as hell; she'd been the super-smart geek, and I'd been the oblivious jock. She mocked my IQ while I cracked jokes about her glasses. Last I'd heard, she'd gotten a scholarship to one of the Ivies. It made sense she was here, being Avery's cousin and all, but damn.

My vision was slightly better than 20-20, something that helped immensely when spotting a football spiraling through the air under stadium lights from forty yards away, so there was no missing the fact that Sadie James was all grown up.

Her dark hair, which had always been pulled up in a ponytail when we were kids, was in a loose braid hanging down her back. Her skin still had the same golden hue, compliments of her half-Hispanic heritage. The sharp angles of her gangly teenage frame had been rounded by the softer curves of a woman. She was still thin, and I vaguely remembered she had some kind of medical condition that kept her on the thin side.

But even from here, I could tell she was stunning.

"Leave her alone, Miles," Emma ordered, but there was a softness in her tone that made me pause.

I glanced down at her, cocking an eyebrow.

She sighed. "Getting Sadie here was a big deal. She hasn't left Clover Springs in almost a decade."

I frowned. "But she got that scholarship to—"

Emma winced. "Yeah, you were already in Oregon for training when it happened. Her grandmother had a massive stroke that summer. Sadie stayed behind to take care of her and went to a local school."

"Wasn't she supposed to go to some fancy Ivy league school?" I knew there'd been a big deal made out of the smalltown girl who'd gotten a full ride to a school most of us had only heard about in movies.

Truthfully, I'd been pretty self-absorbed back then. I'd been too focused on football and my own scholarship, and getting laid, to really pay much attention to Sadie James.

Unless she was in my way or pushing my buttons, something she seemed to love doing.

Em nodded. "Yeah, but she gave it up to take care of her grandmother. She never left Clover Springs."

My head swung to face her as my jaw dropped. "No shit?"

She nodded slowly. "Her grandma raised her after her parents died, and Sadie felt like she owed it to her... Anyway, her grandmother passed away last month. It's been rough."

An ache settled in my chest as I watched the woman staring at the water, her back to me and the world, as if she could block it all out by not seeing it.

The urge to go to her was sharp and swift, and it left me reeling as Emma went to answer the door and grab out food.

I watched Sadie until Emma called for me, and even as I turned my back on her, it felt wrong in a way that surprised the hell out of me.

This was Sadie James. My high school nemesis. The girl who loved giving me shit.

And now she looked like a woman who desperately needed... something.

Something that, for whatever reason, I felt compelled to help her find.

Chapter Two

SADIE

I BURROWED MY TOES DEEPER INTO THE WARM SAND UNTIL ALL HINTS OF the red polish decorating the nails was gone.

It still didn't feel real.

Sitting on a beach, watching people having the times of their lives, while I just... sat here.

Life moved on around me, just like it always did, but this time I was caught up in its tide and being dragged out to sea. My anchor was gone, and whatever sails and rudder I'd haphazardly slapped on my metaphorical ship years ago were shredded.

Gram's death had left me adrift, and I didn't know where to begin to start putting the pieces back together.

If it wasn't for the fact that Avery was like a sister to me and had laid a massive guilt trip at my feet about missing her wedding, I'd be in Clover Springs right now. Probably boxing up the last of Gram's possessions before the bank officially kicked me out at the end of the month.

Regret and self-loathing welled up in my chest, familiar emotions that seemed to follow me everywhere.

I'd tried so hard to make it work, but Gram's medical bills had kept piling up, and my part-time work as a substitute teacher hadn't even started to make a dent. I'd thrown what little cash I'd had left from the settlement of my parents' death at the second mortgage we'd taken out last year, but ultimately it hadn't mattered.

I still hadn't had the heart to tell Avery how bad things were, but she must've had some idea, because she'd offered to pay for my flights and hotel so I could come to the wedding. At least I didn't

have to worry about a bridesmaid's dress; when Gabe had proposed, Gram had still been alive, and we hadn't thought I'd be at the wedding at all, let alone be part of it.

Good thing. I couldn't have afforded one of the beautiful gowns I'd seen some of the women trying on the night before.

It was humiliating enough that Avery and her fiancé were footing the bill for my stay. Avery was insistent I be part of the wedding events all week, including the bachelorette party tonight and the spa day tomorrow, but I couldn't help but feel like an outsider.

I'd grown up with a lot of these people, but while they'd all moved away from Clover Springs and gone on to live their own lives, I'd stayed rooted in our small town and barely finished night school on what was left of my scholarship a few years ago. Going back to get my master's or teaching degree hadn't been an option as grandma seemed to get sicker with every year that passed. Now I had a pretty useless bachelor's degree in English Lit, a nearly empty bank account, and no place to live in two weeks.

A warm breeze ruffled my dark ponytail.

Maybe I could live on a beach. I could dig out my own little sleeping area in a sand dune under a palm tree—

"Sadie James."

The deep voice snapped me out of my oceanside fantasy and hurled me right back into the past.

Spine stiff, I glanced back and just barely kept my jaw from dropping open at the sight of Miles Hensley.

Miles had been *that* guy in high school. All wavy dark hair and mossy green eyes with a muscular physique that had seemed impossibly unfair for a guy in high school to have. But now? Eight years later? That boy was all man, and I was all too aware of the way his white shirt clung to the hard muscles of his chest and biceps.

"Thought I recognized you," he added, dropping into the sand beside me like we were old friends.

I still was gaping at him like an idiot.

He tilted his head curiously. "But I do remember you actually being able to speak." He winked and nudged my shoulder. "Gotta admit, I think I like this quieter new you."

Okay, *that* sparked some life back into me.

"What are you even doing here?" I demanded.

His brows lifted. "She speaks. And Gabe's been like a brother since I was thirteen. He asked me to be in the wedding."

Avery had hired his twin, Emma, as their wedding planner. Gabe and Rhys were best friends, and I'd seen enough social media pictures over the years to know Gabe and Miles had become friends, too. Hell, Miles was one of the groomsmen. I'd known I'd see him at some point, but not *now*.

Not when I was busy throwing myself a pity party for one and mentally designing what color sand I'd like on the floor of my new dune.

I eyed him. Once again, Miles Hensley was the opposite of me in everything.

I'd heard he'd signed a multi-million-dollar contract last year with some team in Arizona.

Okay, fine.

He'd signed a contract with the Phoenix Dragons and wore a green-and-white jersey with the number forty-three. I might have watched a few of his games last season out of sheer boredom while Gram napped.

But stalking him on social media... I'd done that because I was a masochist. He didn't seem to have a girlfriend in any of the Instagram pictures he'd posted...

... so I hadn't felt too bad using him as the star of my fantasies a few dozen times while I'd used my hand and a battery operated friend to get me off.

He really was too damn pretty.

Sighing, I turned my gaze back to the water. "I didn't mean here at the resort. Avery told me you're in the wedding. I meant why are you here on the beach." I held up a hand before he could ask me something snarky. "And I mean this specific stretch of beach where I happen to be sitting."

"Truth? I saw you sitting out here by yourself and thought I'd say hi," he replied.

Huh. I didn't have a response for that, and my confusion must've shown.

His smile sobered a little. "Emma told me about your grandmother. I'm sorry."

I jolted and returned my attention back to the ocean. "Um, thanks."

I hated this part of death. The endless apologies and platitudes. It was part of the reason I'd wandered out to the beach to be alone.

A warm hand settled on my knee, and tingles of awareness sizzled across my skin. "I remember your grandma. She was awesome, and made the best blueberry pie."

A sad smile lifted the corners of my mouth. "There's still a drawer full of all the ribbons she won at the annual fair."

Or there would be until the bank came and repo'd those, too.

Ugh. I really needed to find out if the mini bottles of alcohol in my room were included in the fees Avery was already paying. I needed to start drinking before I started crying again.

"Emma said you still live in Clover Springs," he added, his tone mild in a way that suggested nothing but made me bristle all the same.

"Well, we can't all get paid millions to catch a ball on the other side of the country," I muttered.

Instead of being offended, he chuckled, and the warm sound slid over my frayed nerves like a balm. "Wasn't aware you'd kept track of me, James. I'm touched."

I smirked a little, letting myself slide back into the bickerish banter that had always come naturally between us. "What can I say? I liked knowing that you were far, far away from me. Helped me sleep at night."

"So, you're saying me being close by will keep you up tonight?" His green eyes sparkled. "What *will* you do to pass the time?"

I gave a small shrug. "Practice holding my breath under water?"

"Sounds dangerous," he teased. "What if the lifeguard isn't on duty? Who would be available to give you mouth-to-mouth if things go wrong?"

I turned to look at him fully, surprised to see his face so near to mine. My eyes naturally dropped to his full lips for a second. "Why are you so concerned about my mouth, Hensley?"

The slow grin spreading across his own mouth made my insides tumble. "It's a great mouth, James."

I sucked down a breath, not sure what to say as the air between us seemed to thicken. This felt like more than the annoyed way we used to trade barbs. This felt... more.

A shiver rippled down my spine.

"Cold?" he murmured, missing nothing.

Slowly, I shook my head. Cold was the last thing I was feeling right now.

"Huh." The soft sound nearly dissipated unnoticed between us until I latched on to it.

"What?" I pressed, unable to tear my gaze from his.

He started to reach out, like he was going to touch me, before changing his mind. "Your eyes. They're the same color as the ocean."

I blinked, surprised, as someone called his name. We turned to see Rhys and Gabe standing on the path that connected the beach to the resort beyond.

"Sounds like you're needed," I prompted when he didn't budge.

"Yeah." Was it my imagination, or did he seem frustrated that he had to leave?

He pushed up to his feet, brushing sand off his legs but careful not to let it hit me. He gave me an odd little smile as he looked down. "See you later, Sadie."

Sadie.

Miles had always called me James or Sadie James. Like I was just another teammate or person in his orbit.

But damn, if I didn't like the way he said my first name alone.

Like on his lips was where it belonged.

Chapter Three

MILES

THE TOP FLOOR OF THE SUN PALACE HAD A PANORAMIC VIEW OF THE ocean beyond. It had been closed off exclusively for the bachelor party, and while there were no strippers, there were plenty of beautiful women serving every top-shelf liquor imaginable as we hung out.

"Something to drink?" A woman with long blonde hair and wide blue eyes glanced down at me and licked her lips slowly in a way that would've woken my cock up a few weeks ago.

But tonight, I had only one set of blue eyes on my mind. They rivaled the turquoise waters of the Keys in beauty, and I couldn't stop wondering what they were looking at right now.

"I'm good." I dismissed her politely with a tip of my half-full beer. Her smile slipped a little as she wandered off.

"Pretty sure she was hoping you'd order off the menu," Hunter joked as he joined me, a tumbler held loosely in one hand.

"Not tonight," I answered. I took a sip of my drink and flashed my agent a smile. I made a point of glancing at his empty hand. "Give your phone the night off?"

With a roster of high-profile clients, Hunter was rarely away from his phone. The asshole flipped me off and finished his drink before setting it on the empty tray of a passing server.

"I do take breaks, you know," he told me, but I wasn't sure if he was convincing me or himself.

"Sure you do," I agreed, my tone clearly conveying that I didn't. In the years I'd known Hunter, I didn't think he'd ever taken a day off, let alone a vacation.

He scoffed but didn't reply. Instead, his gaze shifted around the room like he wanted to be anywhere except here. Which was strange, since the groom was his little brother. If anything, it was Hunter's job as Gabe's big brother to be giving him shit while counting down his final days as a free man.

I was about to ask if everything was okay when he flashed me a tight-lipped smile and clasped a hand on my shoulder.

"I'm taking one right now. See ya later, Hensley," he told me before walking away.

More amused than confused, I watched him thread his way toward the rear of the room and get into the elevator without a backwards glance. Like there was something he needed more than whatever this room had to offer.

Huh.

I turned my focus back to the poker game in the middle of the room and tried to pay attention to my friends, but my mind kept drifting back to the girl I'd left on the beach until I finally decided enough was enough.

Caving, and knowing I'd get shit for ducking out early, I said my goodbyes and slipped into the elevator. Instead of getting off at my floor, I went to the ground level and walked outside.

The air was still warm even though darkness had settled in hours earlier. I shoved my hands into my pants pockets and walked aimlessly down the paths until I realized I was back at the beach.

Frowning, I realized my girl was still there.

Whoa.

I rocked back on my feet.

First, she'd changed out of the tank top and shorts. I could make out the silhouette of a dress that ended somewhere along the middle of her tan thighs. Her hair was down and loose, and longer than it had been in high school.

Second? Sadie James wasn't *my* anything.

My dick stirred to life as if begging to differ.

Of course the temperamental fucker would pick *now* and *this woman* to wake up around.

I should have walked back inside and found the server who'd obviously been interested if I wanted some action. Instead, I found myself walking toward the girl who'd been consuming my thoughts all damn night.

If younger me had gotten a glimpse into the future, I'm sure I'd have nut-kicked myself for seeking out Sadie James not once, but twice, in a single day.

When I reached the end of the path, I kicked off my dress shoes and yanked off my socks before setting them beside a delicate pair of gold heels.

The sand felt gritty and warm between my toes as I walked over to where Sadie was standing, watching the waves pounding against the shore. The wind kicked up, whipping her hair into a frenzy, and I was struck with the idea of taming it by wrapping it around my fist.

I froze, gritting my teeth as my dick perked up again.

Fucking hell. It was like I was a teenager, popping wood at the slightest shift in the goddamn breeze.

I'd just about gotten myself under control when Sadie turned, shoulders slumped and curled in, her arms wrapped protectively around her middle. She jolted in surprise when she saw me, but it wasn't the shock in her expression that had me instantly moving forward.

It was the delicate sheen of tears in her oceanic eyes, mingled with the look of utter hopelessness.

Every protective instinct in me kicked in as I looked for whatever, or whoever, had hurt her. Seeing no one and nothing, I turned my full attention back to her.

"What happened?" I demanded, my tone a little harsher than I would've liked. Something about seeing her in pain made me a little homicidal.

She started to shake her head and look away even as her bottom lip quivered.

My hand shot out, cradling her jaw and keeping her from dismissing me. "Sadie, are you hurt? Did someone hurt you?" I scanned her quickly in the darkness, checking for injuries. All I saw was glowy skin that looked incredibly lickable.

"It's all falling apart," she whispered, the words nearly snatched away and washed out to sea with the wind.

"What is, sweetheart?" My hand slid into her hair, sifting the soft strands between my fingers as I anchored them at the base of her skull.

Her dark lashes were wet as she looked up at me. "My life. It's a mess, Miles, and I don't know how to fix it." She shrugged, her thin

shoulders barely moving. "I don't think it *can* be fixed."

I plainly heard what she didn't say.

I don't think I can be fixed.

But there was nothing wrong with this woman, and I'd be damned if I let her go on thinking there was.

Without a second thought, I pulled her against my body, crushing her to my chest as I hugged her with everything I had. The dam broke as soon as my arms were around her, and her small body shuddered as she sobbed against me. I held her until she started to quiet.

"I'm sorry," she gasped, starting to pull away.

Something in my heart cracked open and roared, not wanting her to move out of my embrace.

Instead, I took her hand in mine and linked our fingers. "Come with me." It wasn't a question, but she nodded her assent anyway and let me lead her away into the night.

Chapter Four

SADIE

MY TEARS HAD BEEN REDUCED TO THE OCCASIONAL SNIFFLE BY THE TIME I realized Miles was leading me to his hotel room. I wasn't sure what had possessed me to break down in front of him, but the weight I'd been carrying around my heart felt a little bit lighter as he opened the door to his room and held it for me.

I stepped inside and noticed his suite was almost a mirror copy of mine with dark wood furniture and white linens. But his balcony overlooked the ocean, whereas mine had a view of one of the three pools the property boasted.

The sunrise probably looked amazing from here.

Miles cleared his throat, seeming almost nervous as he watched me in his space. "Do you... Can I get you something to drink?"

I shook my head and looked down to see I'd traipsed sand into his room from my bare feet. "Crap. Sorry."

He didn't look bothered at all. Then again, he'd left his shoes somewhere on the beach, too.

Shoot. I really hoped no one took the shoes I'd borrowed from Avery for the bachelorette party. Everyone had dressed up to go to the club up the street, and she'd loaned me her extra pair of heels so I wasn't the only one in flats.

Not that I'd stayed at the party very long. Just enough to toast to the future Mrs. Carter and take a few pictures. But as I'd watched these girls—no, these *women* that I'd grown up with—I'd felt like an outsider.

Avery was getting freaking *married* to the man of her dreams.

Her maid of honor, Brie, worked at the same company as Avery and Gabe].

Emma was now a mega-successful wedding planner.

Rylee was killing it as a photographer.

Lottie had an insanely popular blog and devoted following.

Heck, even Avery's childhood friend Ruby had left Tennessee and seemed to be living it up as an accountant in New York City. Or had been. I'd overheard her talking about having left her job recently.

And that wasn't even counting the other women who had come. One had just finished grad school for marine biology and another was a damn neurosurgeon.

Meanwhile, I was a part-time substitute teacher. I was fully vested with the powers of passing out busywork papers to surly teens and turning on surprise movie days for kids a few days a week.

Standing amongst these incredibly successful women, I snapped. I'd knocked back my obligatory shot of tequila and hauled ass out of the club before I could start crying into a margarita and ruining Avery's evening.

I'd carefully kept the truth about my and Gram's finances secret. Clover Springs was a small town, and I knew Avery's parents would have helped us if I'd asked, but Gram had always been too proud to ask anyone for help, and I'd kept her secret until it became my own.

Now it was this big thing, and it was only a matter of days until the truth came out. I didn't want Avery or her parents worrying about it during her wedding.

But, damn, I was sick of carrying around this secret. Of being scared of what awaited me when I went home now that the funeral was over and life was moving on.

"Want to tell me why you're so upset?"

Miles's deep voice startled me from my musings, and I turned quickly to see him casually unbuttoning his shirt. I sort of forgot how to swallow or breathe as I waited for the view to come...

Except it was a little ruined by the white wifebeater he had one under his dress shirt. That was disappointing in ways I wasn't ready to explore right then.

He hesitated, green eyes wide, before pulling his shirt off his shoulders. "Uh, sorry. Do you mind? I hate dressing up."

My lungs remembered how to work again as I waved a hand for him to continue. "Of course not. It's your room."

He flashed me a smile that had charmed countless girls and women from Clover Springs and no doubt beyond, then finished shucking off his shirt and tossing it carelessly onto the floor.

Not even the sight of those mouthwatering biceps and all that golden skin kept me from frowning at the small mess he'd left in his wake.

He grinned at me, almost rueful, and bent to grab the shirt. "Sorry. Emma was always giving me shit about leaving a mess in the bathroom we shared when we were kids. Guess I never really grew up."

Oh, Lord, was that ever a lie.

I felt my cheeks heat as he turned away to properly hang up the shirt in the closet, giving me a view of his broad shoulders, thick with muscles all the way down to where his waist narrowed over the tightest ass I'd ever seen.

Miles Hensley was all grown up in *all* the right ways.

A low, foreign ache pulsed between my thighs, and I found myself wishing I'd brought one of my battery-powered boyfriends along for the trip.

"So?" He closed the closet door and turned his whole focus back to me. "What happened?"

I ducked my head, the intimacy of the situation suddenly hitting me. We were alone in his hotel room. I'd just spent the last ten minutes sobbing in his arms on the beach like something out of an overly dramatic romance movie. All that was missing was a thunderstorm to set the mood.

And because God had a sense of humor, the sky outside lit up for a second before a massive thunderclap shook the hotel.

Miles hurried to close the balcony doors, locking them just as rain started lashing the panes.

I rolled my eyes toward the ceiling, wondering what kind of cosmic joke was being played on me because, what the hell?

"Damn," he remarked, looking at the sky, "it's really coming down."

"Figures," I muttered, knowing my room was on the *other* side of the resort and I'd have to go outside to retrieve Avery's shoes and

get to my suite. I hoped the shoes didn't get ruined. Though with this rain, it was probably already too late.

"How so?"

I shook my head with a sigh. "It's just kind of the perfect end to my night. No, my day. Scratch that—my *year*."

A tiny crease formed in his brow, but he didn't ask questions. He just let me talk without any pressure. I'd spent the better part of a decade taking care of Gram and keeping everything together.

Which was probably why I suddenly uncorked like a New Year's bottle of champagne all over him.

"I'm homeless," I announced, not even pausing when surprise registered on his face. I raked a hand through my dark hair and started pacing. "Gram was so sick, and her bills were so much... We took out a second mortgage on her house, and I managed to pay it off last year, but then she had another stroke and a heart attack this year. And her insurance didn't cover her homecare nurse, so I had to scale back on teaching jobs to take care of her. Then the insurance stopped covering some of her meds, and we fell behind on the bills. Her life insurance covered her funeral and the hospice care for the last month, but that was it."

My chest was heaving, but I couldn't stop. "The bank is foreclosing at the end of the month. I never told Avery because I knew she'd tell her parents and they'd do something totally selfless like scale back her wedding so they could help me, but it isn't their problem, you know? Gram took me in after my parents died, and I *had* to take care of her."

I stared at him until he nodded. "See? You get it. And it's not like there's a million opportunities for work in Clover Springs, especially not places that would be okay with me calling out or leaving early because Gram had a bad night or wasn't having a good day..."

A hysterical laugh bubbled out of me as I faced Miles. "I have no career, no house, no savings, and no *freaking* idea what to do next."

"I'm going to suggest you start by taking a breath," he said mildly, his tone even and calming enough that I did as he suggested. I dragged in a slow breath and held it for a beat before releasing it.

"Okay." He rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "What do you *want* to do?"

"What?" I scrunched my nose and looked at him.

"Sadie, what do *you* want to do? Take everything else out of the equation—your job, the house, the debt, all of it. If you could do anything in the world right now, what would it be?" His emerald eyes burned bright as he watched and waited for my reply.

"Right now? Right now I want to forget," I answered honestly. "I want to... let go and live in the moment and do something just for *me*."

He drew closer to me, like we were magnets unable to fight a polar attraction. "Then do it, Sadie. For tonight, let it all go, and I'll help you deal with it in the morning."

"Why would you do that? You always hated me."

A soft, almost shy smile made him look like the boy I'd known once more. "I never hated you, Sadie. You intimidated the hell out of me."

"I did?" My voice came out as a squeak. He was Miles freaking Hensley. He was the golden boy of Clover Springs. The local boy turned legend when he went pro. Even before that, he could do no wrong in the eyes of our small town.

"Fuck yeah," he replied with a chuckle that warmed my belly. "You were the only person who didn't buy into my shit. It was kinda hot."

My brows shot up. "*What?*"

He rolled his eyes and licked his lips as he rubbed the back of his neck. "You had that whole good-girl vibe going on. I can't begin to tell you how many of us guys would watch your ass walking away in those skirts, praying the wind would blow."

My jaw dropped. No way. I'd been such a geek in high school. I'd had it in my head that if I dressed like a college professor, I'd somehow actually *be* smarter.

His gaze darkened and dropped to my mouth a second before he groaned softly. "Yeah, and don't get me started on the fantasies I'd have about those lips and what they could do."

I dragged my bottom lip between my teeth to keep from admitting that he'd probably be disappointed in my lack of experience. I'd had one boyfriend in the last eight years.

Vince had stuck around for almost six months before he ended things. I couldn't blame him. Spending Saturday nights on a couch with your girlfriend and her half-lucid grandmother watching

Bonanza reruns wasn't exactly the stuff twenty-year-old guys enjoyed.

The handful of times we'd had sex, it had been more about him than me. And I'd felt so bad about bailing on him so much that I hadn't really minded.

Something told me sex with Miles wouldn't be like that. He looked like he knew *exactly* how to play a woman's body to exquisite perfection.

Heat flashed through me, curling low in my stomach.

"Did you mean what you said?" I demanded, a little breathless.

He blinked. "What?"

"About tonight and taking what I want," I reminded him, nerves tangling together and writhing with anticipation.

He nodded slowly.

"You," I declared, watching the way a smile started spreading across his lips as he figured out where this was headed. "I want you."

Chapter Five

MILES

HELL YES.

That was the only thought my brain could formulate before I reached out and did what I'd wanted to since Sadie had stepped foot into my room. I hauled her against my chest and crushed my lips to hers.

Licking at the seam of her mouth, I demanded she let me in, and when she did, I groaned long and low. She tasted sweet as sin. Like strawberries and tequila.

Teenage me was an idiot; instead of trading barbs all those years ago, we should've been doing *this*.

Her small body fit against mine like it was the missing piece, and I didn't hesitate to grind my erection into her soft belly. Judging by the way her fingers tightened around my shoulders and she rocked against me, she was as into this as I was.

I needed more of this woman. More of her taste on my tongue and her scent invading my senses.

My hands tightened on her hips as I lifted her up. She wound her legs around my waist without hesitation, and I could feel the heat from her pussy against the front of my pants.

"Fuck, sweetheart," I whispered in a rough, gravelly tone as I trailed kisses along her jaw and down the line of her throat.

"Don't stop," she gasped, her hips rocking in jerky movements against me as she chased her own pleasure.

I smirked inwardly, walking us to the bed. No way was I letting Sadie's first orgasm with me come from her rubbing against my

hard-on like we were horny teenagers fumbling through a rushed makeout session.

Her first time would be on my tongue after she'd been screaming my name for release.

My knees hit the bed and I dropped her onto it. She bounced against the plush mattress with a squeak of surprise, her wide blue eyes shooting up to meet my gaze.

"Miles." Her voice shook a little as my name fell from her swollen lips.

I grinned and dropped to my knees in front of her, thanking whoever was listening above that my girl was wearing a dress as I nudged her legs apart so I could fit between them.

Her fingers fisted in my hair, and it took a second for me to realize she was holding me back. When I arched a curious brow at her, her cheeks flushed a deeper crimson than before.

"You don't have to," she told me quickly, already trying to slide her legs together and angle away from me. "I know guys don't like —"

"Whoa, whoa," I cut her off, frowning. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

Her ears actually turned red as she ducked her head. "You know. Going down on a girl. You don't have to. It's not a big deal."

"And if I want to?" I challenged, even more intrigued by her reaction now. Something told me that my girl had never come from oral, and *that* was a goddamn shame.

Her eyes rounded with so much innocence, I almost laughed. "Y-you do?"

I licked my lips and used my hands to push her knees apart. Her pussy was covered by a thin scrap of lace. I could already see the center was wet and waiting. "Fuck yes, I do."

Sliding my hands up the insides of her thighs, I pulled her underwear down her legs and tossed it aside.

She wouldn't be needing those for the rest of the night.

Fuck, for the rest of the damn week, if I had it my way.

Her bottom lip was caught between her teeth as she watched me warily. I winked at her, loving the attention. "Eyes on me, sweetheart. I want to see your expression when you come all over my mouth."

Her eyes flared wide as I lowered my head to swipe the flat of my tongue up her pussy.

Just like I thought: fucking perfection.

Using my thumbs to spread her wide open, I started lapping at her in earnest. I sank my tongue into her center and then licked lazy circles around her clit.

"Miles!"

I loved the way she cried my name, part desperate plea and part anguished prayer. As if I was her tormentor and her savior all at once.

I worked a finger into her tight, wet heat and almost came in my pants when I felt her walls clench around me.

"Greedy girl," I murmured, smirking up at her.

Her gaze went unfocused and glassy and her chest heaved with each breath, those gorgeous tits straining against the soft cotton fabric of her dress hard enough that I could make out the points of her nipples.

Unable to help myself, I reached up and pinched one of them as I curled my finger inside her and sucked her clit between my lips.

She exploded around me with a sharp cry, her upper body falling against the bed as her strength gave out and she let herself be swept away. I eased her down from her high, feeling her twitch around my finger as I wrung out the last drops of her orgasm. Then I kissed the top of her pink pussy and lifted myself up to stare down at her.

Dark hair fanned out around her head, her skin glowing, and a lazy smile on her lips. The sight made me feel like a fucking champion. Who needed a damn championship ring when they could leave a woman this sated and happy?

My cock jerked in my pants as if to remind me we weren't done.

We were nowhere close to done.

Chapter Six

SADIE

MY PULSED THUNDERED IN MY EARS AS I SLOWLY DRIFTED BACK DOWN TO Earth. Opening my eyes, I gulped down a breath in time to see Miles strip off his shirt with a smug smile.

I knew that look well. It had irked me in high school, but now it was full of dark, dirty promises I was aching for him to deliver on.

When he stepped back, my heart slammed in my chest and I irrationally panicked. "Don't go."

The corner of his mouth kicked up as his hands started to undo his pants. "Sweetheart, I'm not going anywhere."

Desire spiraled through my core, my fingers clutching the rumpled comforter. I started to draw my legs closed, but his hand shot out to stop me.

"Don't." The word came out in a low growl that almost made me moan. His tongue darted out to wet his lips as his gaze locked on the juncture between my thighs. "I love looking at you like this. All sweet and innocent... Was that the first time a guy ate you out?"

Embarrassment heated my cheeks. "I, um..."

His grin grew even cockier. "It was, wasn't it? Jesus, James, what kind of punks did you date?"

I squirmed a little. "I didn't exactly date in high school."

His eyes went wide, and he hesitated. "Shit. Are you a virgin?"

I shook my head. "No. I was with a guy, but we never did *that*. He didn't want to, and asking felt weird."

He scoffed and rolled his eyes. "You shouldn't have to ask. Your man should want to do whatever it takes to make you scream his name. And for the record? You taste fucking divine."

My stomach swooped and my breath caught in my chest. I wanted to tear my gaze from his, but the heat simmering in the mossy depths of his green eyes held me captive.

"You ready for more?" The teasing lilt in his voice made my pussy clench as it literally ached and wept in anticipation of just that.

I nodded, not trusting that I could form even a single sentence.

He arched a brow. "Words, sweetheart. I want to hear you say how much you want me."

"I..." Blushing furiously, I forced myself to keep going. "I want you."

His returning grin was shameless. "You have me." But he didn't actually move.

Shit. Was he really going to make me *say* it?

My knuckles turned white as I clutched the bedding. "I want you... to touch me. To be *inside* me."

"I want that, too," he murmured, pushing his pants and boxers down in one smooth move. He straightened, and his massive cock bobbed up, tapping his stomach.

Apprehension trickled through my blood. He was... significantly bigger than my ex had been. Longer and thicker. Hell, everything about Miles was bigger, and *thicker*, than my one and only boyfriend.

"I'll fit." He winked at me, the ass, when my gaze shot to his. "Promise."

He reached out a hand and I took it, letting him pull me up. With burning eyes, he lifted my dress. It had a built-in shelf bra, and I wasn't exactly rocking a ton of curves up top, so I hadn't bothered with an actual bra. He tossed the garment aside, and my nipples pebbled under the cool air.

"Fuck," he whispered, the sound a guttural rasp, before he dipped his head and sucked a peak into his mouth.

My knees shook, and I wrapped my arms around his shoulders as I started to sway. He turned his lips to the other bud, nipping and sucking as his fingers traced my slit with sure fingers, the calloused pads of his fingertips driving me crazy.

His mouth moved back to mine, his tongue sweeping inside to conquer mine like he had every right. All I could do was hang on while he kissed me senseless and slipped two fingers into me. When his thumb stroked my clit, my back arched and my hips jerked as I

tried to ride his hand. Already I could feel another orgasm building between my legs as his hot cock ground into my stomach.

To my utter disappointment, he pulled back. I almost let out a plaintive whimper, but the look in his eyes stopped me.

"Lay down, sweetheart," he ordered.

I hurried to obey, practically falling onto the bed and scooting back to make room for him to join me. He paused to fish a condom out of the pocket of his pants, and then he was crawling over my body. My legs fell open to cradle him like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Do you want to turn off the lights?" My gaze flicked to the switch.

He chuckled and started to roll the condom down his impressive length. "Why would I want to miss a single fucking second of your pussy taking my cock?"

"Oh," was all I could get out. Sex had always been an in-the-dark kind of activity before. I knew I didn't look like a lot of the women Miles had probably been with. My boobs were on the smaller side, and I was skinny to the point where concerned women stopped me in the mall to ask if I had eaten today.

Hyperthyroidism sucked. It left me feeling like a gangly, awkward mess of jutting bones and sharp angles. Men liked their women to have curves, and I looked like a piece of lumber someone could pick up at the hardware store.

"Hey," Miles said, his tone sharp and pulling me back to the moment. "Where'd your head go?"

I shook myself out of the miserable thoughts and forced a smile. "Nowhere," I assured him as I ran my fingers up his back and enjoyed the feel of the muscles flexing under my touch. I tried pulling him down to me.

He held still and firm above me, caging me in but not touching. "Bullshit, James. Why'd you ask about the lights?"

I tried to look away, not wanting my insecurities to intrude on what had already been the best sexual experience of my life.

But Miles simply braced his weight on one arm and used his free hand to hold my chin still. "Sadie."

"It's not a big deal."

"Then you can tell me." He wasn't going to let this go, and suddenly my impulsive one-night hookup with my high school

nemesis felt entirely too intimate.

"I know I don't look like most of the women you've probably been with," I admitted, shame coloring my words.

"No," he agreed, his thumb gently sweeping across my jaw. "No one could compare to you, Sadie James. From the way you gave up your life to take care of your grandmother to the way you taste on my lips... You're fucking perfection. No one else could ever come close to that."

My heart started to pound. "Miles..."

"Don't believe me?" He arched a brow, and then his fingers drifted down my body to dip inside of me. A moment later, his fingers prodded at my lips. "Taste yourself."

My tongue darted out, and I sucked his fingers into my mouth with a groan. There was something so darkly erotic about my own flavor bursting on my tastebuds.

"So fucking perfect," he whispered, almost to himself as he watched his fingers disappear into my mouth with hooded eyes. The tip of his cock sank inside of me, and he took his hand back to grip my hip before pushing fully into me.

I cried out as my body adjusted to the delicious intrusion. My legs hooked around his back, trying to pull him even deeper. As if that were even possible.

Miles dropped his forehead to mine, hissing out a breath. "So tight. So perfect." He kissed me softly. "Just like I always knew you would be."

I smiled as he started up a slow, steady rhythm between my legs until I felt my orgasm building but hovering just out of reach.

"Miles, please," I whimpered, my nails scouring his back as I tried to get him to move faster.

"Please what, James?" He pressed into me, grinding himself against my clit. "Use your words, sweetheart."

"I... I need..." Shit, I couldn't *think*, and he wanted me to talk?

"Come on," he taunted with a dark chuckle. "You were class valedictorian. I know you can speak."

Something inside me snapped and I grabbed a fistful of his hair. "Fuck me harder, Hensley."

He grinned. "Thought you'd never ask." His hips slammed into me relentlessly, driving me higher and higher. When his hand

slipped between us and rubbed firm circles around my clit, I came apart with a scream.

I was still in the hazy throes of my release when I felt him jerk inside me with a groan, following me over the edge.

He collapsed on top of me, his weight pressing me deeper into the mattress.

"Holy shit," I whispered, my insides a gelatinous pile of trembling mush.

He laughed against my breast before pressing a kiss to the nipple. "You can say that again." He shifted off me to get up and handle the condom. He came back from the bathroom a minute later and paused to stare at me.

I smirked inwardly as his gaze devoured my naked body.

"Stay with me tonight." It wasn't a request.

"One condition," I countered.

He looked at me expectantly.

I gave a small giggle. "We do *that* again."

He gave a *tsking* sound and shook his head even as he got into bed and pulled me into his arms. "Words, James. Come on."

I met his gaze and held it as I pushed myself up onto one elbow to look down at him. "Fuck me again."

He grinned. "Deal."

Chapter Seven

MILES

I COULD FALL IN LOVE WITH THIS WOMAN.

Days later, I watched as Sadie slept on the sand beside me, her dark hair pulled up into a bun. The look of peace on her face was one I was becoming accustomed to. She'd probably have something to say if she knew how much I watched her sleep.

Convincing her to move her shit to my room hadn't been nearly as difficult as I'd thought. The morning after our marathon sex night—I'd taken her four more times before dawn, a personal best for me—she'd agreed to my proposal.

We'd spend the rest of the week with each other. Friends with benefits was the general gist, but I'd blown off the men's golf outing on Wednesday to take her into town and window shop. Thursday and Friday had been days where no one had plans, so we'd split time between the beach and my room.

I owed the cleaning staff a hefty tip at the end of this week, because they'd have to sanitize every surface.

Glancing around the beach at the scattered couples I recognized from the wedding party, I had a feeling I wouldn't be the only one who would be paying the staff for their discretion.

I was supposed to be at the rehearsal dinner in a few hours, and I was already hating that I would have to leave Sadie. Without realizing what I was doing, I reached out and stroked my knuckles down her sun-drenched back. The warm skin seemed to shiver beneath my touch, and she turned her head to glance up at me over the rim of her oversized sunglasses.

"Do you have to go?" Her voice was thick with sleep and exhaustion, a raspy shadow of her normal tone, since she'd spent most of the night—and morning—screaming my name.

"Not yet," I answered, smiling as she relaxed. "I don't want to."

Curious, she pushed herself up to her elbows, her dark hair brushing the beach blanket sprawled beneath us. An amused smile played on her sinful mouth. "Uh, you're in the bridal party. It's kind of important for you to go to the rehearsal dinner."

"I guess." I shrugged and turned my attention back to the water, the unease that had settled in my gut since we'd woken up churning in full force. "The wedding is tomorrow and then we go home."

"Yeah." The soft note in her voice made me feel like shit for even bringing up home. I knew she was worried about the chaos that awaited her and the uncertainty of her next steps.

But that was also why I felt compelled to bring it up. The idea that had been percolating in my brain for a few days now wasn't going to wait much longer.

"Have dinner with me," I requested.

An adorable smile tipped her lips up. "You're having dinner, Hensley. With everyone in the bridal party. Remember?"

Rolling my eyes, I reached over and tapped the tip of her nose. "Smartass. I guess what I'm saying is, I want to talk to you."

She sat up, doubt creeping into her eyes. "Uh oh. That doesn't sound good."

Shit, I was seriously fucking this up. "No, it's not *bad*."

"Then tell me now." She reached for the sheer coverup she'd tossed aside hours earlier and pulled it on, like she needed a protective layer.

"I want us to sit down and talk about what happens next." I let out a heavy breath and dared to look at her, suddenly more afraid of the willowy brunette than being chased by an entire defensive team.

Her brow furrowed. "You just said it. Rehearsal, wedding, home."

I cleared my throat. "I mean with us."

Understanding lit her blue eyes, but the glimmer dimmed just as fast as it appeared. "Miles..."

"Just... Can you let me get this out?" I turned my body so I was fully facing her, my attention focused solely on the woman before me.

The woman who had thrown my life into beautiful chaos these past few days.

She forced a smile and nodded. "Sure."

"I want you to come to Phoenix with me." I held up a hand to silence her when her eyes went huge and she opened her mouth. "Listen, I bought a place there last year to be with the team. It's ridiculously big, and even if you don't want to move in with *me*, there's plenty of space for you to get set up and figure out your next move."

"My next move?" Sadie shook her head. "Miles, I'm not a charity case."

"I never said you were a charity case, and if you think that's the only reason I'm asking you to come with me, then you're not as smart as I thought you were."

Her brows shot up. "Excuse me?"

Okay, probably not the best way to convince the woman I was falling for to give up her life and follow me to the other side of the country.

"That didn't come out the way I meant it," I added quickly.

To her credit, she didn't stand up and storm away as I'd kind of braced myself for. But Sadie definitely looked pissed.

"Can we—" The timer on my phone went off, reminding me it was time to go upstairs and get ready for the rehearsal dinner in a few hours. "Shit."

Now Sadie stood up, brushing sand from her legs. "You need to go."

Grimacing, I joined her in gathering up our blanket and towels. "We can finish talking on the way to my room."

She stepped back. "Actually? I think I'm going to go back to my room."

"Sadie—" Panic lanced through my chest as she dodged my outstretched hand.

"No, it's fine. Seriously. We had fun, Hensley, but I think it's best if we just end whatever *this* is now."

"What if I don't want to end this?" I countered, stepping closer. "What if I think this is something worth going for?"

She gave me an unreadable look. "Then I'd say you've taken a few too many hits to the head, Hensley." She hugged her towel to her chest. "Look, thank you, okay? Being with you these last few

days has been... amazing. I think I forgot how to have fun over the last few years, and you reminded me what that's like."

"It doesn't have to be over," I argued, wincing inwardly at how easily she brushed off these last few days like it had just been any other summer fling.

"What am I supposed to do in Phoenix? I've never lived anywhere except Clover Springs."

I rubbed the back of my neck. "Funny you should mention that. I might have a job for you. Sort of."

"Sort of?" she echoed, disbelief dripping from her tone.

"The Dragons have a charity foundation that's devoted to helping kids receive the best education possible. I was talking to the director, because she had an idea for how to better invest in the kids' futures, but she's having a hard time finding the right person."

"The right person for *what*?" she demanded.

I took a deep breath and went all in. "They want someone who's willing to work with them on their Read First program. It promotes literacy in elementary-age kids, and you mentioned those are the ones you most like subbing for."

She gave me a dubious look. "Miles, I don't have a degree in teaching."

"But you do in English," I shot back. "The director says that with the time you've put in subbing, combined with your degree, and the fact that you used to tutor in high school... She wants to interview you, but it's just a formality."

Her spine stiffened. "I don't want a pity job because I'm sleeping with you."

I blanched, my brows shooting up. "That's not what this is, Sadie. It's a good opportunity, and they'll cover the costs if you want to go to school and get your teaching degree, too."

"No," she replied flatly, her mouth set in a mulish line.

"No?" I repeated, dumbfounded.

"Hell, no," she clarified, stepping back. "I need to figure out my life. It's not your problem, Hensley."

I scowled at her. "I didn't say it was, James." Jesus, why was she so damned hardheaded? Didn't she see I was just trying to help... and also give whatever was happening between us a shot?

Was it impulsive? Sure, but I'd learned to rely on my gut on and off the field. And my instincts were screaming at me that Sadie was

the real thing. She just needed to give us the same chance I was.

Her expression fell. "I... I appreciate you trying to help me out, but I'm not mooching off you for God knows how long. Look, the last few days were fun. *More* than fun. I'll remember this week for the rest of my life, but now it's over. I'll see you later, Miles Hensley." With a sad smile, she turned and walked away.

And I fucking let her go.

Chapter Eight

SADIE

AT THIS POINT I PROBABLY SHOULD'VE BEEN USED TO BEING ALONE, BUT as I sat out on my balcony later that evening, the silence around me felt wrong. Gram hadn't spoken much during the past year, but I'd filled the silence by playing audiobooks or reading to her whenever I could. The weeks after her death had been the quietest of my life, but I was accustomed to being on my own.

Yet somehow, in the span of a few days, I'd gotten used to Miles being around.

I'd gotten used to the way he'd constantly hum Beatles tunes under his breath as he moved around the room. I'd grown accustomed to sharing space with someone else, and even stopped grumbling when I picked up the clothes he threw around the room like confetti.

But mostly I'd become addicted to his touch.

He was a tactile man, and while I loved every second we spent in his bed, I loved the way he was always looking for reasons to touch me. He'd walk by and stroke my hair, or brush a hand against my hip as he moved around me. The one night we'd tried hanging out and watching a movie, he'd pulled me onto his lap to snuggle like I was his own personal Miles-size teddy bear.

Lord, did that man love to cuddle.

I'd awoken with his arms wrapped around me for the past three mornings. For the first time in nearly a decade, when I woke up, I didn't already have a mental list tallying up what I needed to handle. My mind was quiet as I rested, content and safe, with Miles.

With a shuddering sigh, I swiped at an errant tear before it could fall. Regret echoed in my bones, and I almost let myself consider what a future with Miles might look like.

Waking up with him every morning, falling into bed with him every night. Making dinner and watching TV, talking about our days and watching his games from the stadium while I cheered his name...

Yeah. It was actually scary how easily I could imagine us fitting together.

But he needed someone who wasn't a jobless, homeless train wreck.

The knock on my door was a surprise, and yet hope surged in my chest that it might be Miles. Before I could come up with an excuse to shoot him down again, I was opening the door.

"Oh. It's you." I sagged in disappointment.

Avery's green eyes sparkled as she looked at me. "Maybe this whole bride thing is going to my head, but I thought you'd be happier to see me."

I stepped back to let her in. "Sorry, Avery. I'm having a bad... life. Aren't you supposed to be at your rehearsal dinner?"

She shrugged and came inside. "What's left to do? We went, we rehearsed, we ate... And I had to leave before I dragged Gabe into the nearest deserted room. Seriously, *why* is it tradition for the bride and groom not to see each other before the wedding?"

The scowl on her sweet face was almost laughable. "Well, I can't promise I'll be much better company than your bridesmaids. I'm kinda having my own pity party. Again."

She glanced at my half-eaten dinner, still on its tray, and the empty bottles from the mini fridge. Because, yes, I'd gotten desperate enough to call down to the front desk and pitifully ask if they were complimentary.

"I see that. And I'm wondering if it had anything to do with why one of my groomsmen looks like someone shot his puppy." She went to the sitting area and dropped onto the couch with an expectant look.

I looked away. "I'm not sure what you're talking about."

"Sure." She snorted and rolled her eyes. "You know Rylee has been running around snapping shots of the entire bridal party and guests the last few days?"

I frowned.

"You should see the ones of you and Miles," she went on. "Honestly, there were times when I was wondering whose wedding this is, with the way you two were looking at each other."

A blush stole across my cheeks. "Av—"

"Don't believe me?" She pulled out her phone and unlocked it, thumbing through until she found what she was looking for. "Rylee took this yesterday. I saw it and asked her to send it to me. I wanted to show you." She held out the phone, and I gasped.

Rylee had managed to snap a picture of Miles carrying me to the ocean. She's managed to catch the sun highlighting his dark hair. Both of us were grinning, and I looked mid-shout, probably because it was seconds before he'd dropped me into the surf.

We were happy...and looked like we were in love.

My chest began to ache as I handed the phone back.

Avery stood up, tucking a lock of strawberry blonde hair behind her ear. "Look, I didn't want to say anything because we know things weren't easy with Gram the last few years. I moved to Miami and got caught up with Gabe, and I suck for not checking up on you more. But when dad told me you guys were losing the house—"

"Uncle Tom knows?" I gaped at her, my heart hammering in my chest.

She gave me a look. "Sade, it's Clover Springs. My dad golfs with the bank president every month. Mom is on the same historical council society as Mrs. Jenkins, and she's been a teller there since before we were born."

I looked down at the floor. "I never wanted your dad to feel like he needed to step in and help."

"Are you listening to yourself?" Avery stared at me like I was crazy. "We're *family*. My dad's planning on talking to you when everyone's back about helping refinance things so you can get out from under the house. We all know how much you sacrificed to care for Gram. Let us take care of you."

"I don't even know what to do," I confessed. "Avery, I'm a part-time substitute teacher with shitty credit and no career in sight."

"Well, what do you want to do?"

Go with Miles. Help kids learn.

"It's not that simple," I muttered. There was no way it could work, and I wouldn't be a charity case. Sure, maybe it would be fun

for a few months, but eventually things would get tense and then what? I'd be stranded in a whole new city with nothing.

Even as I reminded myself that, a stupid, traitorous little voice in my head whispered, *But what if it could work?*

"Why the heck not?" Avery grabbed me by the shoulders, giving voice to my inner thoughts like she had them on speed dial. "You've put everyone but yourself first for *years*. Isn't it time you went for what you wanted?"

"What about the house?" It had been in our family since our great-grandfather built it.

She waved a hand. "Do you *want* the house?"

Not especially. It had meant the world to Gram, but I'd always wanted something newer and modern, filled with a lot of natural light somewhere sunny and warm.

Once upon a time, Avery had been my closest friend. Years and life had pulled us apart, but there would always be that bond.

"How did you know you were in love?" I asked hesitantly.

Her eyes widened for a second. "When I realized Gabe was the person I wanted with me no matter what. If all my dreams came true or my life fell apart, he was the one I wanted to have next to me."

I bit my lower lip. "I've only known Miles for a few days."

"Lie," she retorted gently. "You've known him since we were kids. And you two had chemistry back then. You were both just too stubborn to do anything about it. But now? Sadie, losing Gram should have taught you how fragile life is. We need to grab it by the balls and hold on."

"Uh."

She waved a hand. "Something like that. You know what I mean."

I laughed and nodded, some of the tension easing in my chest.

"So?" She smiled at me. "What do you want to do? Who do you want standing next to you on the best day of your life?"

Butterflies tickled my insides as the answer ricocheted through my bones and settled in my soul.

Chapter Nine

MILES

I TOSSED MY SHIRT ON THE BED AND GLARED AT THE PIECE OF FURNITURE like it was personally offending me, which it kind of was. All I could see was Sadie splayed across it, her tits heaving as I thrust inside the tightest, hottest pussy I'd ever been in.

But more than that, I missed the times when we'd lay on the bed facing each other. When she would ask me about the team and the game I loved. When she lit up talking about the students she'd been able to help.

Fuck, I just loved talking to her. Looking over and seeing her curled up next to me while she slept.

That fucking bed was mocking me.

With a grimace, I turned away and considered trying to fit myself onto the small sofa to avoid spending a night without her by my side. Rhys and Gabe had given me shit tonight, telling me that I should try again with Sadie. Hell, even Hunter seemed to be riding the love train, and he'd once again rushed out early to get back to his date.

I snorted. Date, my ass. I knew the look of a man in love enough to know that Gabe wasn't the only guy who'd be getting the girl at the end of the week.

My stomach soured as I realized I wouldn't be one of them.

Emma had tried to grab me, but I'd left the dinner before my twin could corner me and ask what was going on. She'd seen me hanging out with Sadie, and I knew the only thing that had saved me from a full-blown twinquisition was the fact that she was swamped with making sure the wedding was perfect.

That, and she seemed too busy arguing with Rhys. Every time I turned around tonight, I'd seen them together.

I was still staring at the bed, wondering if I could sleep in it when my door opened behind me. I turned and was shocked to see Sadie in the doorway.

She held up a piece of plastic. I'd given her one of my room keys a couple days ago. "I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not," I stammered, my cock jerking a bit since Sadie was in proximity to a bed. "Are you... What's up?"

She entered the room, her shoulders hunched and her blue eyes big. "Can we talk?"

I nodded. "Do you want to sit, or...?"

"Um, how about if I say what I came to say and then you decide?" She waited for me to nod before continuing. "I'm scared, Miles."

Instantly I started for her, but she held me off with a hand and a shake of her head.

"I have no idea what to do next. My life is... Well, you know." She let out a weak laugh and ran a hand through her hair. "But Avery asked me tonight what I wanted, and then she reminded me that life's short."

"Okay. So, what do you want, James?" I pressed softly.

Tears filled her eyes. "You. And maybe it's crazy to come with you—"

I didn't let her finish before I crossed the room and hauled her into my arms. My lips crashed down on hers with a groan as her taste filled my mouth.

She tore her lips away with a gasp. "I think I'm falling in love with you, Miles Hensley."

I rested my forehead against hers. "I think I'm already there, Sadie James." I kissed the tip of her nose. "Spend the night with me?"

"Yeah," she agreed with a small smile that made my heart beam.

"Move in with me?"

Another nod. "Okay."

"And the job? You don't have to take it. It was just an idea—"

She silenced me by rolling to the tips of her toes and kissing me. "I think the job sounds amazing. Especially if I can also go back to

school and get my teaching degree. I always loved volunteering, and I love working with kids."

Unable to stop myself, I kissed her again. My hands went to her hips, slipping under the cotton of her tank top and pushing it up. My hands skimmed her breasts, pausing to unlatch the front of her bra and then removing her top.

As soon as she was bared to me, I dripped my head and suckled a perfect dusky pink bud into my mouth. Her fingers clawed at my hair, scratching my scalp as she whimpered.

I loved the sounds she made when I was driving her crazy.

Spinning us, I walked her to the bed before pushing her down and yanking off her shorts and panties. Then I licked up the length of her slit before spearing my tongue inside her core and using my fingers to torment her clit. The tiny nub throbbed under my touch as she writhed on the bed, a mess of incoherent words until she was clenching around my tongue and riding my face shamelessly.

I kissed my way up her body and helped her get my clothes off. I didn't hesitate to push inside of her, a low moan working out of my throat as I felt how snug she pulsed around me.

"Shit," I swore. "Condom."

"I have an IUD," she quickly said, wrapping her legs around my waist before I could retreat.

My eyes blazed down at her. "You're sure? I've never... Fuck, you feel incredible, sweetheart."

Her gaze heated and she nodded. "I'm yours."

"Prove it," I teased, flipping us so she was straddling me. I reclined back, resisting the urge to pump inside of her as I folded my arms behind my head and watched her luscious tits sway. "Ride me."

A wicked glint entered her eyes as she planted her hands on my chest and rocked our hips together. Her eyes fluttered shut, her head falling back in ecstasy. She lifted up and slid back down my length, crying out as she ground her clit against me.

"That's it, sweetheart. Take whatever you want," I encouraged, watching as she found her rhythm. I let her go at her own pace until I was too frenzied to stop myself from lifting my hips to meet her. When my fingers slipped between us and circled her swollen clit, she came with a scream. The hot clench of her pussy sent me

hurtling over the edge of oblivion, spots dancing in my vision as I came harder than I ever had in my life.

With a ragged gasp, Sadie collapsed on my chest. I held her against me, loving the feel of her weight anchoring me to the moment. I stroked my fingers up and down her spine.

"We'll make this work," I vowed, knowing we would as she turned her face and kissed me.

And as I stood up with my friends and family the next day while Gabe pledge to love and honor Avery for the rest of their lives, I looked out and found Sadie in the audience. My gaze locked with hers, my intent clear as they recited their vows.

One day I would put a ring on her finger, and we would promise ourselves to each other for the rest of *our* lives.

Sadie James was a sure thing. She was my past, my present, and my future.

Hannah McBride Books and Bio

Hannah McBride has been many things in her life: a restaurant manager, a clinical research coordinator, a dreamer, a makeup brand ambassador, an event coordinator, a blogger, and more. But at heart, she's always been a writer, and in 2020 she decided to make it official.

Good luck stopping her now.

You can check out her other books at:
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Rylee & Jase

KACI ROSE

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Chapter One

RYLEE

THE BLINDING SUN HITS MY FACE THE MOMENT I STEP OFF THE AIRPLANE. The Florida sun is no joke, even here in Key West. This airport is so small that you exit the plane right onto the tarmac before heading into the airport.

A huge white sign with red letters that reads "Welcome to the Conch Republic" greets us as we walk into the airport and get blasted with the cold air. No sooner do I step through those doors than my phone starts ringing. I check it to find it's my cousin, the one who's getting married here in Key West and the whole reason for my visit.

"I seriously just stepped off the plane," I answer the phone with no hello because we only talked a few hours ago during my layover.

"I know. I was tracking your flight," Avery says as if I should know that on top of planning her wedding, she's also stalking my flight.

"Well, I'm here. I still have to go get the rest of my bags, but I'm on the ground." I sigh because there's no use in arguing with her. This is her week, and I'll make sure I do everything I can to keep her happy.

"So, you're coming to the wedding without a date?"

"Are we going to have this conversation again? You know I wanted to bring Jase, but he's deployed. So, my date is my camera."

Jase is my military pen pal. We've been writing to each other for over seven years now, but we have yet to meet. Avery is the only person who knows I've completely fallen for my pen pal, which is why I don't date anymore.

My family assumes I don't date because of my body issues. I'm curvier than the rest of them, so I prefer to be behind the camera, taking the photos instead of in front of it. It's also the reason I started my own photography company after some encouragement from Jase. My business has grown so much that I now have an assistant. Not only did I agree to do all the photography for the wedding, but I'm also one of the bridesmaids.

My assistant got in earlier today, and we'll start scouting the places where we'll be taking photos. It's a great way to keep busy and avoid the "why are you here and still single?" questions.

"Rylee, you know I want you to be happy, but I worry that this guy isn't who he says he is. It's been seven years. Why haven't you met in person? Only someone who has something to hide would put off meeting you for that long.

"He's not the only one putting off the meeting. I like things the way they are. As soon as he sees me and sees that I'm heavier than the image he has built up in his mind, it'll ruin everything, so I'd rather just keep it the way it is."

"I want you to have a relationship with more than just a piece of paper. So, I..." "She trails off, hesitant to finish the sentence.

"What. Did. You. Do?" I know that voice. She did something I'm not going to like, and I have an idea what it is.

"I want you to enjoy this week. You're in a beautiful location on the beach, and I set you up with a date for the wedding. He's Gabe's friend's brother and a good guy, I promise."

Gabe is her soon-to-be husband. He's a great guy, and I like him a lot. Even though I haven't met any of his friends or family that I don't like, it doesn't mean I want to be set up with any of them.

I take a deep breath before responding. I don't want to say anything that will upset Avery because this week is all about her.

"I don't have time to date right now because I have tons to prepare for all your wedding photos. I need to scout out the different locations and I have plans with my parents, who I haven't seen in a while. But I promise I'll be nice to whoever you set me up with on your wedding day."

The line is silent for a few minutes, and I pull the phone away from my ear to make sure we didn't get disconnected.

"Well, that will have to be good enough for now." Avery finally says.

"Listen, I have to get to the baggage claim, get my bags, and then onto the hotel. We will talk later, okay?"

"All right. Just shoot me a text when you get to the hotel. Take a day and relax tomorrow, and I'll see you at the bachelorette party."

After we hang up and I get my bags, I finally take a look around the airport. There are a lot more people leaving than arriving since it's a Sunday, so once I get out front, it's pretty easy to get a ride to the hotel. I snap a few photos on my phone from the car.

The moment I get into my room, I dump my bags on the bed and pull out my laptop to check my email. I can't stop the smile that fills my face. I have an email waiting for me from Jase.

Rylee,

Right now, I'm sure you're up in the air reading whatever romance novel you picked up at the airport store. I hope you love the book and get to finish it.

Remember to take this time to relax, too. I know you're working and part of the wedding, but it's Key West. Go out. See the sights and be a tourist. Just be safe.

Jase

In my senior year of high school, we were given a project to write letters to a pen pal, a deployed soldier. I got Jase, and we kept writing even after I graduated from high school. After he got home from deployment, we continued to write.

We never made plans to meet. We just kept writing through his training, his deployments around the world, and the Dear John letter that nearly broke him. A few years ago, we made the transition to writing emails. But when he's deployed, I still write the paper letters because he says he enjoys getting them during mail call.

Avery doesn't know that we've talked on the phone a few times during his latest deployment. That's a new development for us, and after hearing his voice, I was hooked. It's gruff and sexy, and the call didn't last but a few minutes, but his voice had me so turned on I couldn't stand it.

Also, Avery doesn't know that I've seen a few pictures of Jase. I did a few late-night stalking sessions and found some of him and his Unit that had been mentioned in some newspaper articles, which led me to find his social media pages.

You would never guess that he's in his late thirties. He's handsome with a powerful body, built like a cover model. Not a guy who would be interested in a girl like me, so keeping all this online and on paper suits me perfectly.

I know Avery and my friends back home worry because Jase is eleven years older than me. He's set to retire from the army in two years. I haven't dated much in the last few years, and they're concerned.

Jase,

I landed and am now in my hotel room. Avery called to check on me the moment my plane landed. The ride from the airport was beautiful and I can tell I'm going to have a great time taking photos here. Be prepared to be flooded with tons of beach photos.

I have a free day tomorrow after I do some location scouting in the morning, so I plan to take in the island then. I'm excited to walk down Duval Street and taste some of the local food.

Tuesday night is the bachelorette party. I'll be working on taking photos beforehand and then my assistant will be taking photos while I relax with the rest of the bridal party. It's going to be at the cute little bar downtown that has dancing and these tropical drink names, basically, everything that Avery loves.

The only downside to this week is that Avery has decided to set me up with a date for the wedding because she didn't want me to go alone. This is her week, and I can't tell her no, but I plan to avoid the guy as much as possible.

Stay safe,
Rylee

Chapter Two

JASE

AS THE PLANE TOUCHES DOWN, I START TO THINK THIS MIGHT BE A horrible idea. Keeping this little bit of information from Rylee felt like a huge lie, and we don't have lies and secrets between us.

When I got the news that my deployment was ending early, she was the first person I wanted to tell. But then this idea popped into my head. Now the plane is touching down in Key West, I'm starting to doubt everything.

Rylee has the bachelorette party in just a few hours, and I know where it's being held. I also know she's scouting locations for wedding photos tomorrow. That's when I plan to surprise her.

After reading over the email from Sunday night again, my nerves disappear. There is no way in hell she's attending this wedding with anyone but me.

Once I get off the plane, I head straight to my hotel. I decided not to stay at the same hotel as the wedding but chose a hotel just down the street. I figured if at any point Rylee needs a break from all the wedding stuff, I'd be able to give her that retreat.

When I'm in my hotel room, I pull out my laptop and go straight to Rylee's social media pages. She's been posting photos she's taken around the island. Of course, none of them are of her. They rarely are.

Rylee and I may have been writing to each other for the last seven years, but a few years ago, between deployments, I tracked her down on social media. When I saw a photo of her, my jaw dropped.

She is curvy in all the right places, sexy, and drop-dead gorgeous. Since then, it's her face I see at night and her body I crave. I want to knead the soft flesh of her hips as she rides my cock.

I know I'm too old for her. She's only twenty-five, but *fuck*, the thought of her with anyone else kills me. So it's time to buck up and take the next step. That's what has led me here to Key West, Florida, of all places.

When my phone pings letting me know I have an email, I check it right away, and sure enough, it's from Rylee. Attached is a photo of the dress she's wearing tonight. It's on a hanger, but I can picture it on her body, and *fuck* if every guy's eye won't be on her tonight.

I hadn't planned to show up at the bachelorette party, but after seeing that dress she's planning on wearing, I wanted to keep an eye on her. My strategy is to stick to the shadows, and she'll never know I'm here.

The moment I walk into the bar, my eyes are drawn to her. I slip into the shadows and order a drink. I don't plan on drinking because I want to be completely sober to watch over her, but you can't stand at a bar without a drink in your hand.

The girls she's with look like they're having a blast. They're full of smiles, and the bride is easy to spot, decked out in a tiara and a bunch of dancing penises. They're everywhere—necklaces, straws, earrings, and other jewelry they're wearing.

I was right about the dress; the deep v-neck puts her tits on display, and the dress hugs every curve. A few guys watch her as she steps back from the group, taking photos.

After an hour, she passes off the camera to a girl I know as her assistant and pulls out her phone. A moment later, my phone vibrates in my pocket, and I have an email from her.

Jase,

I completely underestimated this whole bachelorette party experience. It's overwhelming but fun.

I've never thought much about my own bachelorette party, but I don't want it to be as extravagant as this one by a long shot.

Rylee

She attaches a photo of the group, and I send an email back.

Rylee,

Have some fun. It will be a great story to tell someday.
When it's your day, you can do whatever you like.
Stay safe, and I can't wait to hear all about it tomorrow.

Jase

When her phone goes off, she reads my email and smiles. Knowing she smiles when she reads my emails, just like I do when I read hers, is another small push toward her.

One of the bridesmaids shoves a drink in her hand, and she rejoins her group. I watch her drink and dance. They take a break and order some food, and then they're back on the dance floor.

I watch a guy approach Rylee and talk for a moment. I almost barge in, but he takes a step over to another girl. Rylee takes a few photos before returning to the rest of her group.

When she starts her fourth drink, I know she's nearing her limit. She doesn't drink much to begin with. One of the guys watching her decides this is the time to swoop in on her. I put a stop to it by walking up behind her on the dance floor and wrapping my arms around her waist.

She keeps dancing, but when she turns to face me and looks up into my face, her eyes round with shock.

"Jase?" she gasps softly.

Her recognizing me confirms she stalks me online as much as I do her, and I love the idea. I'd know her voice anywhere after talking on the phone. It's sweet as sin and I hear it in my dreams.

"Surprise." I smile.

She squeals with happiness and throws her arms around my neck in a hug. Then she turns, pressing her back to my front, and continues to dance. Her friends look at me curiously, but no one says anything. I've never been a big dancer, but I'll take her dancing every night if dancing means having her rub up on me like this.

As she sways to the music, I allow my hands to slide over her curves—the curves that have been the cause of many orgasms. The curves that have kept me up at night and hard most of the day.

She has another drink before I cut her off and switch her to water. When she starts slurring her words and stumbling, I decide it's time to get her out of here. I take her phone and text the girls in the group chat that I'm taking her back to the hotel and then get us a ride.

No sooner do we hit the car than she's fighting sleep, so I take her back to my room. At least there, I can watch over her and make sure she's okay. I carry her from the car to my room with no problems.

When I lay her down on my bed, I hate how empty my arms feel. I remove her shoes that look like they're hurting her feet and place some aspirin and water on the nightstand. Then I put her phone on silent, so it doesn't wake her.

After covering her up and getting ready for bed myself, I sit in the armchair on the other side of the room and gaze at the angel fast asleep in my bed. She barely stirs all night, but I have no intention of sleeping a wink and missing a second with her.

Chapter Three

RYLEE

UGH. WHY DOES IT FEEL LIKE THERE'S A ROCK CONCERT GOING ON IN MY head? And why is the light so bright?

When I finally crack open an eye, I know I'm not in my hotel room. I freeze. Did I go home with a guy last night? That's when memories of dancing with Jase flood back. Was I so drunk I thought some random guy was Jase?

Groaning, I turn my back to the sun shining through the window, and that's when I hear a deep chuckle. My eyes fly open to see Jase sitting in the chair on the other side of the room.

Shit.

He's really here? He's supposed to be deployed. Did he lie about that? Is Avery right that I can't trust him?

"Slow down, baby girl. I can see the questions flying through your head," he says as he stands and picks up the bottle of water from the nightstand. He opens it and hands it to me before sitting back down.

I drink up and just watch him as he starts talking.

"I got home from deployment early and decided to surprise you since I knew you'd be here. We've talked about this wedding for months, so it wasn't hard to pinpoint where you'd be last night."

"How long have you been home?" I ask.

"A few days. Soon as we were released, I came straight here. Got in yesterday, a few hours before the bachelorette party. I went just to see you, but you kept drinking, so I stepped in to make sure you got back to your room okay but brought you to my room instead."

"Did we... umm, did we, you know?" I have to ask because I don't remember leaving the bar.

"You were blackout drunk. Well beyond the ability to consent to anything. So no, we did not have sex, and I didn't even sleep in the same bed as you. I sat in this chair all night." His tone is firm, almost like he's mad I'd think he would do something like that.

Relaxing, I take the aspirin sitting on the nightstand and look him over. He's all muscle and tan. His short, military haircut doesn't hide the bit of gray at his temples, and the wrinkle lines around his dark eyes are sexy as hell.

The photos online didn't do him an ounce of justice.

The more I wake up, the more I remember last night. How protective he was of me, and how he took care of me at the club and helped me in the car. I don't think I've ever had someone take care of me like he has.

Then worry hits me. What if he thinks I'm just some silly little girl that he felt compelled to take care of or sees me as nothing more than a daughter figure.

"There you go again. Your mind is racing. Why don't I take you back to your hotel room so you can change? Then we'll go out for a hangover breakfast."

"Hangover breakfast?" I ask.

"I don't drink much anymore, but it's pretty common in my unit. It will make you feel better. Drink the water while I get ready."

He grabs some clothes and goes into the bathroom while I sit there and finish up the water, running my hands through my hair the best I can. I get up and look through my purse, find a hair tie, and get my hair pulled back enough to look decent. There's no hiding my walk of shame, and worse yet, I didn't get the fun part of it.

I take a quick trip back to my room and toss on shorts and a comfy shirt, fighting the urge to dress up like a date because it's not. He's just making sure I eat. I grab my camera and everything I need to take some fun photos around town before heading out.

We walk down the street from my hotel to a little cafe serving breakfast. It's full of tourists, but the food smells amazing. Jase is a perfect gentleman, opening the door for me, guiding me to our table with his hand on my lower back, and even pulling my chair out.

The waitress comes over to take our order, glances at me, and starts smiling. Then she flirts a bit with Jase. I can't blame her because he is hot. But what irritates me is that I'm sitting right here, and she's acting like I'm invisible.

"So, what have you seen since you have been here?" Jase asks once the waitress leaves the table.

"On Monday, I spent most of the time around the hotel getting the lay of the land for the wedding. Then I took some time with my parents, and after that, I went for a walk on the beach. Yesterday was much the same."

While we eat, we talk about the wedding planning and my parents. It's interesting watching tourists come in wearing their tropical clothing and acting like they're locals.

When we finish eating, Jase grabs the check.

"Oh, let me get my half." I pull out my wallet.

He looks at me like I just removed my head and sat it on the table next to me. "Absolutely not. I've got this. And for future reference, anytime you're out with me, I'll be paying. End of discussion."

I stare at him for a moment, processing his words. Is it a military thing, the whole real gentleman part of him I'm seeing today? It has to be. I've dated, and there aren't guys like this out there anymore.

"Thank you." I smile at him. "I'm going to use the restroom before we go." Standing, I walk to the bathroom.

After taking a few deep breaths to compose myself, I go out to join him. Of course, the waitress decided to swoop in when I wasn't there. She's at the table, flirting with Jase and placing her hand on his shoulder. His back is to me, so I have no idea what his reaction is.

"... I'd love to show you the local side of Key West. I get off work in an hour if you change your mind."

She leans down and scribbles something on the receipt as I sit back down. Then she walks off, giving Jase one last wink.

He's home from deployment, and she's pretty. I'm sure he wants to have some fun with her but probably feels shackled and stuck taking care of me. So I give him an out.

"I was thinking of spending some time by the pool. You should go hang out with her. It would be more fun." I smile at him as I collect my things.

He reaches across the table and takes my hand.

"I don't want to go out with her. I want to explore Key West with you, that is if you want to. If not, that's okay too. Either way, I won't be calling the waitress."

Chapter Four

JASE

THAT DAMN WAITRESS DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO TAKE NO FOR AN ANSWER. To see it upset Rylee as much as it did was completely unacceptable. Now I sit here, hoping she'll choose to spend the day with me.

"If you're sure. I would like the company."

"Of course, I'm sure. I'm here to see you, spend time with you, and I'll take as much of that time as you're willing to give me. Why don't you sit on the bench outside and plan where you want to go? I'll join you in a moment."

Rylee is hesitant but agrees, and once she's outside, I stop the manager and fill him in on the waitress's tactics and how pissed I was she did it in front of my girl. Then I hand him the receipt with the phone number, telling him to relay to the waitress why she's only getting a few dollars tip from me.

Normally, I'd let it go, but seeing how it upset my Rylee, I knew I couldn't let it stand. If it affects her the way it did, it's not okay.

She looks at me hesitantly when I join her. "Everything all right?"

"Yes. I just talked with the manager and had him give the waitress her number back. I wasn't happy with how she treated you, so I took care of it. Now, where to first?"

Her eyes go big, and she sits there in shock before looking down at her phone.

"I think we should start with getting our photo at the Southernmost Point before it gets too busy, and then head to the Ernest Hemingway home?" she asks like I'm going to tell her no.

"Whatever you want, baby girl. Lead the way."

We get our tickets for the trolley to ride around town, and as she takes photos, I hold her bag for her. We visit a few historical locations, and I stand back and watch her take photos.

Stalking her online is nothing like seeing the real woman in action. She's so good at what she does and so passionate about it. That's when I can't deny the truth anymore.

I'm in love with this girl.

I haven't been with anyone since I got the Dear John letter from my ex. That's because of Rylee. She was a sophomore in college then, and that's when it hit me: this girl I've been writing to is now a woman.

Through it all, she was there for me and listened. She seemed to know exactly what to say, and I started looking at every letter a bit differently. Six months after that, I looked her up online, and the girl I found was sexy as hell. Not only was she way too young and innocent for me, but she was in a relationship at the time.

I watched her, kept writing, and she blossomed into this beautiful woman now standing in front of me. One that I want to claim as my own. No one can compare to her, so I haven't even tried.

Without her, I'm not sure I would have gotten through the deployments and training. She means so much to me, even as a friend, but I want to be so much more than friends. Though I'm not crazy enough to think a young girl like her could love me like that. No, I have to be okay with the friendship.

After the historic houses, we stop at the Original Key Lime Pie Bakery. We share some key lime pie and watching her enjoy everything makes our time together fun and easy. I pick up on her flirting with me and decide to take a chance. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

As we walk Duval Street killing time waiting for the Sunset in Mallory Square, we look at the shops and bars. I take a chance and reach for her hand. As I intertwine our fingers, I look over at her.

I find her looking back at me with a smile on her face. She gives my hand a gentle squeeze as we keep walking. Just this small contact has my heart hammering out of my chest.

She's holding my hand and smiling about it. Every once in a while, she stops to take a photo, and when she's done, she reaches for my hand again like it's the most natural thing in the world.

We get to Mallory Square early and take in the street performers and different stands. There are so many people, but we still manage to get a good spot. Deciding to take another chance, I pull her into my arms, so her back is to my chest.

I wrap my arms around her waist, and she leans her head back on my shoulder, resting her hands on top of mine as the colors start to fill the sky. Resting my head against her, I just soak in the moment with her here in my arms and the beautiful sunset in front of us.

As the sun dips below the water and everyone starts moving, neither of us seems eager to let the moment end.

She turns in my arms, looks up, and smiles at me. At that moment, there's no way I can't kiss her. Her lips are too perfect, and she's so close, with her chest pressed to mine.

I lean in slowly, giving her plenty of time to turn away or stop me, but she doesn't. Instead, she leans into me, and when my lips land on hers, I can't stop the groan that rumbles from my chest.

Cradling the back of her head, I slowly tease her lips. She tastes better than I could ever have dreamed. Her lips are soft, and the more we kiss, the more she melts into me and the harder I get.

I tear myself away, not because I want to stop kissing her, but because much longer, and things will start to get indecent out here in public.

"Let me take you out on a proper date tomorrow night, baby girl," I whisper in her ear.

"Okay. I have stuff going on all day, but I can get away for dinner."

Just like that, I have a date with the curvy angel who has graced my dreams every night for the last few years.

Chapter Five

RYLEE

TODAY I HAVE MY LAST DRESS FITTING, AND AVERY PROMISED TO STOP BY so she can hear the details of Jase in person. She shows up as they are finishing up the last-minute nips and tucks to the dress.

"Oh, you totally ditched spa day for this guy. Please tell me it was worth it," Avery says as she flops down on the chair next to me.

Yesterday was a spa day for the bridesmaids and I was going to stop in, but the day was going so good with Jase that I skipped it.

"Totally worth it. He took me anywhere on the island I wanted to go. He held my bag and didn't complain once when I stopped to take photos and even let me take a few of him. We spent the whole day together and even watched the sunset in Mallory Square, where he kissed me and then asked me out on a real date tonight."

Avery lets out a squeal in a way only someone truly happy for me could.

I go to change out of the dress and check my phone.

Jase: Can I see your bridesmaid dress?

Me: Will you tell me where we're going tonight?

Jase: No...

Me: Then, no.

I include the winking face emoji and change out of my dress.

Jase: Exploring the city isn't the same without you. Can I pick you up early?

My heart flutters. He wants more time with me, and I certainly want more time with him.

Me: How early?

Jase: Now? Or as soon as you can get ready.

Me: I won't be able to get away for a few more hours, but I'll let you know.

"I don't have anything to wear," I say when I step out of the changing room.

Avery checks her phone and sends off a text. "Come on. There's a super cute shop a few doors down."

As we walk, Avery keeps looking at me but doesn't speak.

"Okay, what is it?" I ask.

"I love how happy you are, and I want you happy, but I want you to be careful. This guy appears out of nowhere after seven years, and I worry about you."

"I'm being careful, I promise. But if this is the only time I can spend with him before we go back to letters, I need to take it."

"I know, just be a bit guarded is all."

She drops the subject as we step into the clothing store.

After spending an hour trying on dresses, I settle on an off-the-shoulder dress that's tight at the top and then loosens up around my waist. It's a long dress with a high slit that shows off my legs. Though it's a casual dress, it's perfect for the relaxed vibe in Key West. It's not what I would typically wear, but Avery says it's the dress that will make him swallow his tongue, and she hasn't steered me wrong before.

When I get back to my room, I send Jase a text.

Me: I just got back to my room, so I'll be getting ready if you still want to meet early.

Jase: Yeah, I do. I'll head over and wait in the lobby. Text when you're ready, and I'll come to your door.

Of course, he will. Jase is the perfect gentleman. After getting dressed, I put some curls in my hair but decide to keep my makeup light and natural. I send him a quick text as I slip into my sandals

and put what I need into a smaller purse instead of the bag I've been carrying around.

That's when he knocks on my door. I take a deep breath and check that it's him before opening the door. When I see him, I freeze. He's drop-dead handsome in dark jeans and a button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up in that sexy way we girls love.

Jase is doing some looking of his own. "Damn, Rylee, I don't know if we'll make it out of this hotel tonight."

That catches my attention. "Is everything okay?" I ask, still caught up in the way the jeans hug his muscular legs.

"Yeah, baby girl, everything is fine. That dress is going to have me hard all night." He reaches for one of my hands, and I look down at my feet as a blush heats my cheeks.

He places a finger under my chin and tilts my head up. His thumb runs over my cheek, which is still stained red. "That was my terrible way of telling you that you look breathtakingly beautiful." His voice is gruff, and I can tell he means every word.

"Thank you," I whisper.

He turns and holds his hand out for me to take. When I do, he leads me downstairs and out of the hotel. I don't ask where we're going. We could be walking across the island for all I care. I simply like walking with him, hand in hand.

We talk about my day, the dress fittings, and even my talk with Avery.

"Your cousin is worried about you, and she's right to tell you to keep your guard up. Even though I get it, I plan to prove myself, and I won't disappear."

He takes me to a restaurant not far from the hotel. It's right on the beach, and we have breathtaking views of the sunset over the water.

"I can't believe you remembered." I don't mean to say it out loud, but it slips out.

When we passed this place yesterday, I made some off-the-wall comments on how beautiful it must be to eat dinner by the water and watch the sunset.

"I pay attention to everything you say or write to me. So yes, I remembered." He gives my hand a gentle squeeze before leading me to our table.

Chapter Six

JASE

I DON'T REMEMBER THE LAST TIME I STUMBLED OVER MY WORDS LIKE A shy teenage boy getting to touch his first pair of tits, but when Rylee opened that door, my mouth went dry, and I felt like I swallowed my tongue.

The way it hugs her curves and shows off her legs, well, we're only just getting to the restaurant and I'm still fighting my hard-on. I don't want to scare her or make her think I'm looking for something she isn't ready for.

Thankfully, the table offers a bit of cover and over dinner, we sit and talk. The more I talk to this girl, the more I realize how mature she is. Our eleven-year age gap seems so small sitting here like this.

When she smiles at me or laughs, my heart clenches. I want this girl more than my next breath, and by the time dessert comes around, I've decided I don't care about the age gap. All I care about is her.

"Would you like to go for a walk on the beach?" I ask as we finish up dinner.

"Yes!" She seems so happy at the simple suggestion.

The feeling that washes over me is one I haven't felt in a long time.

The moment we are on the beach, she reaches for my hand, and I pull her close. I don't want the night to end because even though it was a simple dinner, this is the best date I've ever had. I want more, but I don't want to push her. I want to drag out this date as long as possible.

We get to the beach in front of her hotel, and she sighs, looking up at the resort. "Is it bad I don't want the night to end?"

"I don't want it to end either." I pause, knowing I shouldn't get my hopes up. But I ask anyway. "Do you want to come back to my room? I promise we can just watch TV. Nothing will happen if you don't want it to."

"I'd like that." She smiles at me again, and all the reasons we shouldn't do this go out the window.

We walk back to my hotel and the moment we're in the elevator heading up to my room, she throws me a curveball.

"Jase?"

"Yeah?" I turn to look at her.

"I don't want to watch TV."

Without thinking, I react. I pin her to the elevator wall and kiss her because I sure as hell don't want to watch TV either.

Her arms wrap around my neck and pull me in, so I kiss her even harder until the doors open to our floor. I practically drag her down the hall, and it seems to take forever to get my door open. But the moment the door closes behind us, I try to put some space between us.

"Wait," I say, trying to catch my breath.

She presses her back to the door and watches me.

"Are you sure you want this? I mean, I'm eleven years older than you."

A look passes over her face that I can't quite make out, and her body stiffens. She shakes her head and steps away from the door reaching for the handle.

"I've been here before. You got carried away, but it boils down to no one wanting to be with the chubby girl. It's fine. Tomorrow, we'll pretend it never happened, and you'll be free."

What. The. Fuck?

She reaches for the door and I'm on her faster than I thought I was able to move. I press my erection into her, so she has no doubt about what she does to me.

"You feel that? I want you, baby girl, more than I have any right to. I was worried you would change your mind about being with an old bastard like me."

I run my hands down her sides and up to cup her breasts. "I love your curves, every one of them. They make me so hard that I have

been fighting an erection since the first day I saw you. And, full disclosure, that wasn't the night of the bachelorette party."

She lets out a small gasp as I spin us toward the bed. "I will only ask you once. If you want this, take off your shoes and dress and get on the bed. If not, head out the door, and I won't stop you. But don't make the mistake of thinking, I don't want this. Because I do. *I want you. All of you.*"

Hesitating for only a moment, she steps toward the bed and removes her dress. My entire body sighs in relief, and I unbutton my shirt as I watch the show in front of me.

When she's laying on the bed in nothing but her bra and panties, and I'm standing in front of her in just my boxer briefs, I let my eyes roam over her freely. No way am I hiding that I'm taking in every detail. I can tell it's hard for her to let me do this, to be so exposed, but I plan to show her how amazing her body is, and over time, this fear will go away.

"Fuck. You looked hot in that dress, but like this, you are stunning." I climb on the bed and gently spread her legs wide.

The wet spot on her underwear has my cock leaking cum and demanding an up close and personal visit. Soon, very soon.

"I want to see all of you," she whispers.

I hear it as loud as thunder. I'm so shocked that, for a moment, my brain doesn't know what to do.

I stand again to remove my boxers, never taking my eyes off her. "Same for you, baby girl. I want to see all of you."

When she removes her bra, her gorgeous tits spill out. Hesitating slightly, she begins to take off her panties. Eagerly, I help her pull them down before climbing between her legs and spreading them again.

I lean down and get my first smell of her. Sweet and musky, like I knew she would be. I settle between her legs, and she pulls at my hair.

"No. I. Ummm." She stumbles over her words.

"No, what, baby girl?" I ask, wanting to make sure she hasn't changed her mind.

"It's just... no one has. You know."

"No one has ever eaten you out?"

She nods her head at my question.

"Consider me honored to be the first person to get to taste this heaven you have between your legs. Now sit back and enjoy it."

Wrapping my arms between her thighs to hold her open, I waste no time getting my first lick of her. Instantly, I'm addicted to her sweet taste. Knowing I'm the only one ever to pleasure her this way has me harder than I've ever been.

I want to take my time and enjoy her like fine wine, but the need to make her come is stronger. Everything in me wants to know what she sounds like when pleasure overtakes her. So I lap up her cream like a starving man before inserting a finger inside her.

She's so tight. The thought of having her wrapped around my cock is enough to make me come, but I force my orgasm back. No way am I wasting this perfect night.

When I suck on her clit, her walls clamp down on me and she explodes, arching her back and screaming my name. Fuck, does my name sound good on her lips.

As her body relaxes, I pull my wallet from my pants, take out the condom, and put it on. I'm back between her legs, crawling over her before she even misses me.

When she opens her eyes and they lock with mine, I freeze for a moment. I line my cock up at her entrance and frame her face with my hands. Never dropping my eye contact, I slowly slide inside her.

The intensity of this moment is nothing like I've experienced before. It's as if my world clicks into place, and she is the missing piece I've been waiting for. Part of me knew that all along, but this just confirms it.

A few thrusts, and I'm flying inside her. Only then do I break eye contact to bury my head in her neck and soak up every little thing about this moment. When she wraps her legs around me, I start a steady rhythm, leaning back to look at her again and find her watching me.

"You're mine now, baby girl. No going back. No games. We will work this out."

Her lips part and she nods her head. I lean down and kiss her, claiming her, letting her know I mean what I say. She is mine.

When I adjust my angle, I know the moment I hit that special spot inside her because her eyes go wide and her back arches. I change my thrusts again to see how she responds. I can't wait to learn every detail of her body and how to get it to respond to me.

In a swift move, I flip us over without pulling out of her. Now she's riding me, and I get the perfect view of her curvy body, her round tits, and of my dick inside of her. I grip her hips and start moving her as she braces her hand on my chest. She looks unsure, as if she might not like being on display for me, and I can't have that.

"The sight of you like this has me wanting to come so hard. You are the sexiest thing I've ever seen. And knowing you are mine... Mmmm, baby girl, I can barely stand it."

As she rides me, I reach down and play with her clit. When she falls apart for me a moment later and collapses on my chest, the feel of her pussy strangling my cock causes me to come, and I almost blackout from the pleasure.

It's the strongest orgasm I've ever experienced, and I can't wait to have her in every corner of this room. Just as soon as I regain my strength.

Chapter Seven

RYLEE

AFTER A NIGHT OF MIND-BLOWING SEX, WITH ONLY A FEW HOURS OF sleep this morning, you'd think I wouldn't have this much energy. We're back at my hotel for breakfast after showering together. He even brought stuff to my room, saying he was staying the night.

Now, he's about to meet my parents whether he's ready or not because they just saw us and are beelining for our table with their breakfast in hand. They sit down across from him, and the smile on my mom's face means trouble. I can feel it.

"So, this is the famous Jase we've heard about for years. We thought you were a ghost, someone she invented to keep us off her back," my mom says.

Jase reaches for my hand on the table in open view of my parents and squeezes it like he's telling me he's got this. It's a move that doesn't go unnoticed by my dad.

"My friends back home feel the same way as you, Mrs. Divens. They thought I was running off on vacation this week and didn't want them tagging along," he smiles.

"How long do you have left in the Army?" my dad asks, skipping the pleasantries.

"Two more years, sir."

"And the fact that you're so much older than my daughter, only eight years younger than me, doesn't bother you?"

My parents were high school sweethearts and got married only a few months after they graduated. I was a honeymoon baby and born before their first anniversary. They were both nineteen.

"Honestly, I think it bothers everyone else more than us. When I'm with Rylee, I don't feel an age gap other than her taste in music. She's always been mature and wise beyond her years."

"It's true. I think it's because she spends so much time behind her camera watching everyone else," my mom agrees while my dad stares Jase down.

"Speaking of, I need to get with Sasha and go over the final wedding photo locations," I say, trying to end the conversation.

We still have some time before I'm due to meet up with my assistant Sasha, but Mom and Dad don't know that, and I want to get out of here before things go too far south.

"Okay, baby, we'll see you at the rehearsal dinner," Mom says as she stands to hug me. Dad hugs me as well but says nothing as we head out of the room.

"I'm sorry about them. I didn't get time to prepare them."

"It's okay. It's good they're protective of you, as parents should be." Wrapping an arm around my waist, he guides me as we go back to my room to grab my camera gear.

Since I'm in the wedding, I'm relying on Sasha for the photography during the ceremony. She is good at what she does. I wouldn't trust her with this if she weren't. But letting go of that much control on such a big project is stressing me out.

We meet Sasha at the wedding location and jump right into angle ideas and the best places to take photos. We do some test shots with the lighting. All the while, Jase is a good sport.

Whatever we ask Jase to do, he does cheerfully. In order for Sasha to get some practice shots, he poses with me, and we walk down the aisle together. He's so easygoing and jumps right in to help.

Every time I look at him, I find him gazing at me. It's as if he's my protector, watching over me, and I love it.

Sasha proves I have nothing to worry about, and we wrap up early.

"Seems I have a whole afternoon free. Know anyone who wants to go hang out on the beach?" I joke with Jase after Sasha finishes packing up.

He wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me into him. I look up into his eyes, seeing something close to love there. But that can't be. We only met in person a few days ago, and there's no way

that's where his feelings are. It must be all the Florida humidity getting to me.

"I'd love to take you to the beach, though I can't promise to keep my hands off you while we're there." He smiles and leans down for a quick kiss.

"I'd be upset if you did promise such a thing." I wink and turn to go back to my room.

Being this flirty is not me, but I'm finding I love it, and with Jase, it's easy. He has this hard exterior with everyone else. But with me, he's all smiles and is playful. I love this side of him.

When I get into my room, I head to the bedroom to change into my bathing suit and pause. It's silly since he's seen me naked, but something about a swimsuit is different.

I don't wear anything skimpy. But I'm a big girl, and I'm not as confident as others. My bathing suit is really cute. It's a pin-up style one-piece with what looks like shorts, so it covers more.

"Stop overthinking and get out here, baby girl," Jase says.

How he knew I was standing here lost in my own head, I don't know. Hesitantly I step out of the bathroom, and Jase lets out a string of curses under his breath. If it weren't for the tent in his pants, I'd think he hated my swimsuit.

"We're going to have a very short trip to the beach because I won't last long before I'm dragging you back up here to slowly peel off that suit."

"You don't like it?" I tease because how can I not with the hunger in his eyes and the way he watches me?

"I fucking love it. What I hate is that every other guy on the beach will be looking at you in it as well."

"Well, good thing I'll only be looking at you."

"Let's get this over with because afterward, we aren't leaving the room tonight," he growls and all but drags me out the door.

Chapter Eight

JASE

AFTER OUR TIME AT THE BEACH, WE SPEND ALL DAY IN OUR ROOM. I make good on my promise to peel the bathing suit off of her and show her how much I love her body. Sunset rolled around, and we haven't left the room except for once today.

I let her take a nap because, in a few hours, we have the rehearsal dinner. Right now, she's snuggled up to me with one leg thrown over mine and her head on my shoulder. As I lay here holding her and watching her sleep, I realize this girl has had my heart for longer than I want to admit.

Somewhere along the line, I fell in love with her on paper, and that love grew the moment I heard her voice. But seeing her this week, I don't think I can go back to the way things were. She's mine, and I need to make sure she leaves here knowing that.

Even though I'm not sure how it's all going to work out, and I don't have all the answers to the questions, I know she's going to ask. I need to convince her to take this leap of faith with me and trust that I will figure it out for both of us. It's imperative that she trusts I will take care of her.

I want to tell her all of this, but I know it's not the right time. The rehearsal dinner kicks off a very stressful twenty-four hours for her between now and the wedding. Since we're both here for a few days after the wedding, I know I'll have her all to myself. Then it'll be stress-free and relaxed. That's when I'll talk to her.

"Baby girl, it's time to get up and get ready for the rehearsal dinner." I gently wake her, and she groans. I can't blame her. I'm sure

she could use a little more sleep, and I should feel bad about that, but I don't.

As she stretches, her breasts push up against my chest, and her pussy presses against my thigh, and it's my turn to groan. She smirks and tries to straddle me.

"I want to more than you know, but we'll be late if we try to get in a quickie. You've told me you want to get there early."

"I know," she sighs. She hops out of bed and goes into the bathroom to get ready.

Getting out of bed, I pull on my pants. I lean against the door frame and watch her put on her makeup and fix her hair. Little things that I haven't gotten to see until now that I want to memorize so I can play them over and over in my head when we're apart.

The thought of not being together makes my heart clench. I've gotten too used to having her at my side this week. Walking away from her is going to be the hardest thing I'll ever do.

The rehearsal flies by. Everyone seems to know what they're doing, but all I can see is Rylee. I can't take my eyes off of her. As we wait for them to finalize the last details, I go with some of her family.

Her family, cousins, aunts, and uncles are so easygoing that I can see me fitting right in. It's easy to tell how much they all love her. They're all a little protective, wanting to know more about me, and I can't blame them for that.

Her dad comes up to me, using my full name. "Jason, why don't you take a walk with me?"

I turn and follow him across the resort to the enormous bar for another drink.

"I'm not going to beat around the bush. I have concerns about how close you and my daughter are getting," he says as we step into the lobby.

"Concerns such as what?"

"Well, you're still in the military, are you not?"

"Yes, I am. I have two years left."

"Do you expect Rylee to sit around and wait for you to finish your two years? And what happens if you reenlist? Do you think it's fair for her to give up her career and everything she's built to follow you around for yours? We both know she's worked hard to build up her business and get to where she is."

I know this better than anyone because I'm the one she talked to about her business. All the stress and late nights were poured into letter after letter, and I wrote back just as many letters of encouragement, telling her that I knew she could do it and how amazing she would be at it.

Rylee's always been there for me, but there's the chance that two years will be too long for her to wait for me. We can do it as friends, as we've done for the last seven years.

But I haven't met a woman yet who's been able to stick it out. Heck, the last time I thought I'd met the one, I ended up with a Dear John letter while deployed. I don't think I could go through that again, no matter how much I know in my heart that Rylee wouldn't do that.

"I have no plans to reenlist. I'll be at my twenty years of service, and I can retire. After I get out, I have a game plan in place that I've talked to Rylee about extensively."

"That may be so, but that's still two years away. She could meet a great guy, settle down, get married and have a kid on the way in the next two years. Are you really going to stand in the way of that?"

The thought of Rylee with anyone else has me ready to punch a hole in the nearest wall, but I don't need to give her father any more ammo that I'm not right for his daughter.

"I would never stand in the way of Rylee being happy. No matter if it's with me or anyone else." The words taste bitter in my mouth, but I know they're the truth. Her happiness means more to me than anything else.

"If you love her, you know the right thing to do." He gives me a pointed look and walks off to rejoin his wife.

I stand there playing the conversation endlessly in my head.

Chapter Nine

RYLEE

EVERYONE SEEMS TO WANT MY ATTENTION AT THE REHEARSAL DINNER. Either for a quick photo or to talk about Jase. The problem is that he keeps getting pulled to the other side of the room with people who want to meet him.

His eye catches mine every so often. At the beginning of the night, his eyes met mine, and a huge smile crossed his face as he gave me a flirty wink. But now dinner is over and we're all talking, his eyes drift over to mine and his face is completely blank.

Every time I try to make my way to him, I get stopped. By the time I reach him, I know something is wrong because he's distant.

"Go for a walk with me?" Maybe getting him away from everyone will help him relax and talk to me about what's bothering him.

He follows me out to the beach.

I remove my shoes as we walk toward the water. "What's wrong?" He stops walking and stares out over the dark water, his hands in his pockets and a far-off look in his eye. "I have to leave before the wedding tomorrow."

My heart breaks. I knew he had to go back at some point, but I guess I assumed he'd stay through the wedding. After all, that was kind of the whole point of being here this week.

"There isn't any way you can stay for the wedding? It's tomorrow night." In my heart, I already know the answer. This is Jase. He wouldn't have said it if there was another option.

"I have to go now and get ready to catch the first plane off the island in the morning." He finally turns to look at me, but what I see

isn't my Jase.

He's cold and distant. His eyes run over my face, and a glimmer of hope is there as he leans down and presses a gentle kiss to my lips. Then he turns and walks back to the hotel without a word.

What the hell just happened? This is not the Jase I've come to know. Did I do something wrong?

Oh god! My family was too much for him, or maybe it was the wedding. He thought I was throwing hints at him by having him help me with the phone the other day, and I spooked him.

I don't even realize my feet are moving until I'm back in the hotel, heading for my parents' room. I need to talk to someone. I know they'll be there, and I don't want to bother Avery since she's getting married tomorrow.

By the time I knock on my parents' door, I can't stop the tears rolling down my face. My mom doesn't ask any questions. She pulls me inside and onto the couch with her and holds me. She's always been great at letting me cry and never says it will be okay or any of that other stuff. She just holds me, rubbing my back, and lets me get it all out.

These moments tend to stress my father out, as evident by the drink he pours himself rather loudly. It's another moment or two before I can sit up and tell my mom what happened.

"I never expected things to be perfect. It's been seven years, and I understand what the military is and does. But why would he show up and be this perfect guy, more than anything I could have ever asked for, and then turn and leave so cold like that?"

"Sometimes weddings are a lot for men. Especially ones who are serious about the one they're with. It could also be he was mad he got called back when he was supposed to have the time off." My mom tried to justify it.

I shake my head because we both know she's grasping at straws.

"He was the first guy who saw me, not my weight. Not the wall I put up, but *me*. I was comfortable around him in a way I've never been with a guy. I didn't need to hide behind the camera with him. Not only has he always supported me, but he was the reason I took the leap and opened my photography studio."

Not saying a word, my dad pours himself another drink. My mother seems to have a silent conversation with him behind my back, but I can't seem to care. Instead, I check my phone to see if

maybe he left a text message or wants to say goodbye in the morning, but there's nothing from him.

"Thank you for listening, but I'm going to bed. I have a busy day tomorrow, and this was the last thing I needed."

Standing, I hug my parents and walk to my room at the other end of the hallway.

I barely make it through the door before memories of him assault me.

I can still smell him in the room, and his shirt is on the bed. He left in such a hurry that he doesn't even want it back.

Picking it up, it smells like him, and a new wave of tears falls. I force myself to get ready for bed, slip on his shirt and a pair of underwear, and climb into bed. I miss him so damn much. How did I think I could do two more years of this?

It would be easier to know he was mine, and I could call or text him when I needed him, but this feels like a breakup. Will the letters and emails stop too? Will I never hear from him again?

I don't think my heart could take it because I'd be losing my best friend. It's just too much.

Chapter Ten

JASE

I'M STANDING IN THE AIRPORT WAITING FOR MY FLIGHT WHICH HAS BEEN delayed. I dread getting on the plane, but I'm ready to be off the island. I'm so lost in thoughts of the last week that it takes me a moment to realize it's my phone ringing and not one of the other people waiting on the plane.

"Hello?" I ask without checking the caller ID.

"Richards." My Sergeant Major's voice replies.

"Sir."

"I have good news. The request for your transfer has been approved. You'll be spending the next few years in Bryson City, North Carolina. I hope it's worth it."

I barely hear the details of my transfer. All I can think is that I'll spend the next two years in the same town as Rylee. I could run into her every day. Hell, I won't deploy for the next two years, and then I'll retire.

I'm not thrilled to be a recruiter, and it isn't common for someone of my rank. I'll oversee the recruitment offices in Bryson City, Cherokee, and Asheville. I applied for this a few weeks ago when I decided to come see Rylee. Even then, I knew a week wouldn't be enough.

Sergeant Major says he'll email me all the details so I can start making plans, and I end the call.

If I ever needed a sign that I'd made the wrong choice, this is it. I let her dad play on my fears, but I know Rylee. She is it for me, and if I can get her to forgive me for walking away, I'll never leave her side again.

Grabbing my stuff, I turn around and head back to my hotel. Fortunately, I have enough time to get a new room, get dressed for the wedding, and make my way to the resort. Though I am technically crashing the wedding at this point, I don't care. I have to get back to Rylee.

By the time I get to the venue, the wedding has already started. I sneak in the back and realize they are at the "I Do" part, and my eyes find Rylee instantly. She's watching the couple, but I can tell even from here how sad she is. Obviously, she's been up crying all night, and I know it's all my fault.

It guts me that I'm the reason for her tears. I have a lot to make up for, but I'll have a long time to do so if I'm lucky. As the bride and groom kiss, I sneak out the back and go to the reception area to wait.

I know they'll do photos, but I also know Rylee will come in here before it fills with people to ensure everything is set up to get the shots she wants. I don't know how much time passes, but I'm right, and Rylee steps in.

This close, she's even more stunning. Taking a deep breath, I step out of the shadows and watch her as she turns to me. When she sees me, her eyes go wide.

"What are you doing here?" Her voice is so soft, I almost don't hear her.

"I'm here for you. I'm so sorry for last night. I let my fears get to me, and I hurt you. But I got a call while I was at the airport that reminded me this isn't just anyone, it's you and me, and I should have trusted that."

When she doesn't say anything, I take a hesitant step toward her.

"Weeks ago, I decided I was coming here to meet you in person. I wasn't content with photos anymore. To know you the way I wanted, I needed to touch you, breathe you in, and know what you tasted like. Even then, I was in love with you. So, I put in for a transfer. Though it was a long shot, I had to try for us. I just got the call that they were approved."

"What orders?"

"To Bryson City, overseeing a few recruiting offices in the area. That way, I won't be deployed for the next two years. Then I plan to retire and stay in Bryson City. Even if you can't forgive me, I'm not going anywhere."

I can't read her. But I want to know what she's thinking, and I need her to know everything.

"Baby girl, I fell in love with you long before this week. When I let people play on my fears instead of trusting in us, I screwed up badly. I know I hurt you, but if you let me have another chance, I promise to trust in what we have and to love you with my whole heart. Because, baby girl, I do. With everything I am, I love you."

I take a few more steps until I'm standing right in front of her. Tears are running down her face, and I don't know if they are happy tears, sad tears, or angry tears. Hoping they are happy tears, I reach out and run my thumb over her cheek and brush a few away. She closes her eyes and leans into me for a brief moment.

"I love you too, Jase. I have for a while." She pauses and looks away.

I want to sweep her into my arms. This amazing girl loves me, but I can tell there is a huge "but" still hanging in the air.

"Are you really moving to Bryson City?" she asks.

"Yes, next month. If you want to start over and take it slow, we can do that, but I plan to see you every day. To spend my free time proving you're it for me."

She smiles big and leaps into my arms. I'm so shocked, I barely have time to catch her before her lips are on mine, but then pull away all too soon.

"I don't want to start over or take it slow. I want to move forward from here, and I don't want to go backward."

"Thank fuck, because neither do I." I crash my lips to hers.

Rylee

As I sit at the reception and watch the couple on the dance floor, I can't help but feel a bit silly worrying about Jase and me.

If the people here can accept Rhys and Emma, who are stepbrother and stepsister, as a couple and be happy for them,

there's no reason they shouldn't be happy for Jase and me.

There are many couples on the dance floor, but I can't take my eyes off Hunter and Skylar. I've been so wrapped up in my little world with Jase that I missed whatever happened between them. I can't wait to pull Skylar to one side and find out.

Hunter is now Avery's brother-in-law, and while Hunter and Skylar came as each other's dates, the way they're looking at each other says there's something much more there.

Needless to say, I think there are many more couples walking out of this wedding tonight than there were when we got here at the beginning of the week. I doubt there will be an end to weddings in our future.

Epilogue

JASE

Three years down the road.

I KNEW I'D LIKE BRYSON CITY BECAUSE RYLEE WAS HERE, AND THAT alone would be enough, but I never knew I'd truly fall in love with the area and the Smoky Mountains. I can't imagine living anywhere else now.

Being a recruiter was never on my to-do list in the Army, but ending every day next to Rylee made it all worth it. We weren't home, but a week before, we were house shopping and bought her dream home. The day we closed, we moved in together, and since then, we haven't spent a single night apart.

Every chance I could, I took the opportunity to go with her to her photoshoots and simply watch her in action. When she wanted to go get photos in the National Park, I was happy to be her driver.

And when the day came for me to put in for retirement, several officers tried to do everything they could to keep me. But I told them there was no way I could leave my girl, and there was nothing they could offer us to get me to accept.

After I retired, in less than a week, I was going stir crazy with nothing to do. It was like fate stepped in. Rylee got a call from Oakside Military Rehabilitation Home in Georgia to come in and do some photos for an event.

We spent a week there talking with the guys who were all injured in the line of duty and were there recovering, many transitioning out of the military. It was then I knew I wanted to help.

From my time in the military, I had many contacts. These were men who, like us, are now out and working, and with Rylee's assistance, we put those contacts to good use. I now work with Oakside and help those men and women find jobs they will love. I've compiled a huge list of people wanting to hire prior military service people, everything from construction to security, office jobs, boat captains, working in tourist resorts, and more.

Many offer training or support while going to school. If I don't have something that fits, I won't stop until I find it. I haven't had a person leave Oakside and not be settled into a job they will love and a life for which they can be proud.

Over the years, I've proven myself, and Rylee's dad has come around. If the lunch we just had today is any indication, he seems to be one of my biggest supporters. Especially now I've made my intentions clear and got his blessing to ask Rylee to marry me.

I can't blame him for being protective of Rylee. In fact, I welcome it as it's never a bad thing to have someone else watching over her. It's why I waited so long to propose. I wanted to win her father over and not give him any reason to object. So waiting until I retired from the military seemed the perfect opportunity. By then, I had to be set up to support her.

By the time I talked to him about it, he wanted to know why I waited so long, and I just laughed. At that point, what else could I do?

I was able to convince her to close her studio early so that I could spoil her. Of course, it's never hard to get her to agree to spend time with me.

"Hello, my love." I greet her as I enter the studio. She's at her desk, concentrating on her computer, probably editing photos.

When she looks up and smiles at me, it stops my heart. Three years later, I still can't believe I get to be with her every day.

"Are you not going to tell me where you're taking me?" she asks as she stands from her desk.

"That takes all the fun out of it. Now grab your camera, and let's go."

I told her I found this great place for her to take photos and bring a tripod because I wanted some photos of us. She still hates being in front of the camera, but it's gotten better, and she especially loves it when I say I want pictures of us together.

On the way there, she talks about her day, the people she worked with, and the photos she took. Even after all this time, the passion is still evident in her voice. We arrive at this old covered bridge that I had some help decorating with twinkle lights.

"Jase, what did you do?" she gasps as I park the car. I know she's excited to get out and take a look but has learned to wait and let me open the door for her.

The moment she's out of the car, she looks at me, her eyes wide with disbelief. I'm sure she's starting to get an idea of what's about to happen. Taking her hand, I lead her onto the covered bridge and under the canopy of fairy lights.

When I turn her to face me, her eyes are a little misty, and it gives me the courage I need to charge forward. I've imagined a million different ways to say this with one-hundred different things I want to say, but in the end, I speak from the heart the best I can.

"Do you know what today is?" I ask her, figuring she probably has no idea.

She shakes her head, and I reach into my pocket, pulling out the letter.

"Ten years ago today, I received your first letter." I pull it out and open it. "It was a very short and very awkward letter, but I knew when I read it that I had to reply. There was something in my gut that knew you were going to be in my life for quite a while."

As tears start falling down her face, I wipe them away before dropping onto one knee.

"You came into my life at a point when I didn't realize how badly I needed you. I fell in love with you on paper, but the first time I heard your voice, it was like your soul attached to mine. After that week in Key West, I knew there was no walking away from you. I am yours so completely, and I hope you will do me the honor of spending the rest of your life with me. Will you marry me?"

She doesn't make me wait long for her answer as a huge smile lights up her face. "Yes!"

She jumps into my arms before I even get a chance to stand up. Once I steady her, I slip the ring on her finger, and that's when her

parents and her assistant step out.

I asked them to be here for her but also to get the photos that I knew she would want.

This is the life I dreamed about on all those deployments. It's the one I dreamed about when I would see her photo but thought I'd never get.

Rylee has agreed to be mine.

Want more Rylee and Jase? [Sign up for my email to get a Bonus Epilogue!](#)

Kaci Rose Books and Bio

Kaci runs on coffee, chocolate, and Oreos. She loves her book boyfriends with tattoos, muscles, beards, and a little dirty.

Kaci loves romance books and has been jotting down ideas since she was in high school and is now putting the ideas down on paper.

She believes in satisfying, happily ever afters with a lot of steam on the way.

She is known for her [Oakside Military Heroes](#) and [Mountain Men of Whiskey River](#).

She also writes steamy cowboy romances as Kaci M. Rose.

Hunter & Skylar

BELLA MATTHEWS

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Chapter One

HUNTER

"SERIOUSLY, SKYE. I CAN'T THANK YOU ENOUGH FOR COMING WITH ME this week." My best friend lifts the window shade of the plane before she relaxes back in her seat. Her pretty strawberry-blonde hair frames her face, and her golden-brown eyes are locked on the runway beneath us. "Ever since Gabe got engaged, my mother's been all over me to settle down. I mean, she was bad after my thirtieth birthday, but that was nothing compared to the past year. She texts me with screenshots of profile pictures of women I went to school with ten years ago, like some fucked up version of Tinder." I buckle my seat belt and stretch my legs out in front of me and then reach over and buckle hers too.

She smacks my hand away and points at the phone I'm holding. "You can stop thanking me if you promise to put your damn phone away, Hunter. You need a vacation as much as I do. A week in Key West sounds like heaven, and the first-class seats are a nice touch. I haven't taken an entire week off since I finished my surgical residency." Skye leans her head against my shoulder and closes her eyes. "Warm sun, blue skies, and soft sand. Remind me to tell Gabe how much I appreciate his choice of wedding venue."

The flight attendant comes over the speaker and lets us know we'll be taking off shortly.

"Yeah well, you can tell him yourself if you still feel that way by the end of the week. I guarantee as soon as we tell my family we're dating, they'll start planning our wedding. There's a reason I live half a country away, and it's tightly tied to why I'm willing to lie to my family this week and let them think we're together." I wish I was

exaggerating, but I'm not. I'm not sure how Gabe manages. I left home at eighteen to play football at Notre Dame, then got my law degree from NYU before joining the Hickam & Dakota sports agency.

My parents are good people.

But they meddle.

We definitely get along better on opposite sides of a FaceTime call than in person.

"Do you remember the night I caught Rick cheating on me in college? When we got so drunk, you carried me back to my dorm? When we thought thirty was so old?"

How could I forget it? My roommate was an asshole who decided getting a blow job from a cheerleader at the football house during a crowded party was a great idea. I still remember the hurt in Skye's eyes when she found me. She thought it was the end of the world.

Rick was a douchebag, and Skylar deserved better.

I told him that with my fist when I got back to the football house after taking her home and staying with her until she fell asleep.

Breaking his nose might not have been great for team morale. But, it sure felt fucking good, considering freshman year, I'd seen her at one of the first parties of the year and told him I wanted to talk to her, but then the fucker beat me to it. Skye and I were already in the *friend zone* by the time they broke up. And that's where we've stayed since.

If she only knew back then how badly I'd wanted her to be mine.

That feeling never completely went away, but the timing has never been right. Skye went to med school in California while I was in law school in New York, and somehow, one of us was always in a relationship when the other was single.

Until now . . .

The plane taxis down the runway, and she grabs my hand in a death grip. "I hate this part."

My knuckles turn white from lack of circulation. "Skye, you're a doctor—"

"Surgeon," she corrects me with her eyes tightly closed.

I lift the armrest between us and lay her hand on my thigh. "You're a surgeon. Can't you prescribe yourself something for the flight?"

By the time she finishes lecturing me on the dos and don'ts of the Hippocratic oath, the plane is safely in the air, and her grip has loosened enough that I can once again feel my fingers.

Mission accomplished.

When the flight attendant comes around a few minutes later for our drink order, we each ask for a rum and Coke, and Skye pulls two protein snack packs she grabbed from a shop in the airport out of her bag. "Here." She hands me one. "Cheese, grapes, nuts, and the little pita crackers you like. It was all they had."

"Thanks." I open the package and grab a little cracker thing. "Not bad."

"Okay, so what's our story?" Skye holds a green grape up to her pouty pink lips and pops it in her mouth. "What did you tell your family? I want to make sure I don't mess it up."

I force myself to stop staring at her mouth. I'm her friend, but I'm still a man, and Skye's hard to ignore.

Skylar Fischer is effortlessly beautiful and doesn't even realize it.

She's wearing a white sundress that ties at the tops of her shoulders, and her thick, strawberry-blonde hair spills in waves down her back. Her porcelain skin is covered in tiny freckles, and those big blue eyes, framed by long dark lashes, look up at me, waiting for my answer.

Shit . . . What was the question?

Oh yeah. Operation Fake-a-date, as my friend Mike called it. Right. "I told them I asked you out when you moved to New York, and the rest is history. They can't wait to see you again."

The perky flight attendant delivers our drinks, and Skye clinks her glass with mine. "This week is going to be so much fun."

Her giddy excitement at being out of the hospital is contagious. Suddenly, the weeklong wedding extravaganza doesn't seem so bad after all.

Chapter Two

SKYLAR

HUNTER HAS ALWAYS BEEN A SEXY MAN. HIS CONFIDENCE IS ALLURING, and his body is a work of art. A carefree smile is, as usual, stretched across his face, and his dark hair is just a tad too long and looks like he's just run his hands through it. But something about him in relaxed jeans with the sleeves of his crisp pale-blue dress shirt pushed up his forearms and a pair of black leather sandals on his bare feet reminds me of a decadent hot fudge sundae just waiting to be devoured. Of course, you know you shouldn't taste it, but you have no doubt it'll be worth every single calorie.

Each brush of his delicious body against mine lights up my skin like the Fourth of July.

When he grabs our suitcases and garment bags and throws them in the trunk of the waiting town car like they weigh nothing, it's just the cherry on top. Sometimes I forget how strong he's always been. And *oh my*, what a turn-on it still is.

He opens the car door and places his hand on my lower back, guiding me into the back seat, then walks around to the other side to take the seat next to me. Ever the gentleman.

"Is there anywhere we have to be today? A welcome event or something? Or do we get to explore on our own?" I can't keep the excitement out of my voice. I jumped at the chance to get away from work and New York to relax on a beach for a few days. And now that we're here, I'm so ready.

Hunter pulls an email up on his phone and scrolls through it. "No official event until the bachelor and bachelorette parties on

Tuesday. Looks like we can do whatever we want tonight. What do you feel like? Want to hit Duval Street?"

"I'm not sure." A yawn reminds me of how little sleep I've had over the past few days. "Maybe we could grab something to eat at the resort and take it easy tonight. I'm coming off a twenty-eight-hour shift and only managed a few hours of sleep this morning before our flight. I think when I crash, I'm going to crash hard." I look out over the orange and purple horizon, disappointed we missed the sunset, but this was the best I could do with my crazy schedule. "Could we do Duval Street tomorrow? Maybe try to catch the sunset?"

"Whatever you need, darlin'." He lays his arm behind me along the back of the seat and squeezes my shoulder.

The moan slipping past my lips is immediate. "God, that feels good."

His thumb works the muscles in my neck, and by the time we drive the short distance to our oceanfront resort, I'm like putty in his hands. "Remind me to schedule a massage this week."

Hunt's fingers stop abruptly, and I miss them immediately. "We're here."

The chauffeur opens my door before Hunt can and insists on getting our bags. The resort is elegant in a modern meets the Caribbean sort of way, with dark wood floors and billowing white curtains framing beautiful views of the ocean beyond the doors. The beat of a steel drum thrums quietly through the speakers, and I can't wait to feel the warm sand between my toes.

Hunter pulls his wallet from his jeans. "I have a reservation for a two-room suite for Hunter Carter."

The gorgeous woman with bronzed skin standing behind the counter bats her lashes at him while she checks us in, and I slip my arm through Hunter's.

Appearances matter. At least that's what I tell myself.

We wouldn't want his parents to not believe the whole dating story.

"Okay, Mr. Carter. That should be everything. Here are your keys. Take the elevator up to the top floor and make a right. You have the corner king suite." She hands him two key cards, and he doesn't look back as we enter the elevator.

"She was making eyes at you," I tell him teasingly.

He wraps an arm around me, and goosebumps break out along my arms. "We can't have that. Not while I'm here with my stunning, brilliant girlfriend." Hunter cracks a beautiful smile, then kisses the top of my head, and confused butterflies take flight in my stomach. This is not how I typically react to Hunter Carter. Not anymore.

"Right." I yawn again, wondering if I'll even make it out of the hotel room tonight before I collapse. And when we step into our suite a moment later, I contemplate never leaving again. The living room is modern with a cream couch, a sleek coffee table, and an elegant dining area. Gauzy white curtains hang down either side of the glass doors opening to the balcony overlooking the ocean. It's a corner suite, so the balcony wraps around the suite to another door I'm betting leads into the bedroom with two lounge chairs by that door. From my vantage point in the corner, I see a tiki bar below and the waves in the distance, and I wonder if I could just stay here all week.

I hear Hunter speaking with the bellhop but tune them out as I close my eyes, letting the warm air sink into my skin before turning around. "Oh, we're definitely sleeping with those doors open tonight." The door to the room clicks shut, but I don't see Hunter. "Hunt?"

He comes back into the living room with his index finger up in the universal *one-minute* gesture. "Yes. This is Hunter Carter." He pauses. "I just checked in. I was supposed to have a two-bedroom king suite." He runs his hand through his already messy dark hair, listening for a minute, and then his gaze darts to mine. "Well, do you have any with two bedrooms available?"

Oh. I brush by Hunter to check out the bathroom and bedroom. They're equally luxurious. But there's only one bedroom and one king-sized bed.

"Are you sure?" Hunt's voice carries down the hall, and I don't miss the frustration lacing his tone. "Okay. Fine. Thank you."

He joins me in the bedroom, where I'm staring at the luxurious, wonderfully enormous bed. One bed.

"I'm sorry, Skye. I thought we were getting two bedrooms. Turns out, it's two rooms, not two bedrooms. I guess this is what I get for booking the reservation myself and not asking my assistant to do it for me."

Our suitcases sit at the foot of the bed, and as I step further into the room, I see our garment bags hanging in the open closet. "Okay. Well, we'll manage. It's not like we've never shared a bed with other people."

"I can sleep on the couch." He picks up his suitcase like he's going to move it out of the bedroom.

I stop him with a hand on the center of his chest, a chest that's solid muscle under my hand. "Don't be silly. That thing is huge, and we're both adults. I'm pretty sure we can share a bed without losing our virtue."

"Darlin', I think my virtue's been gone for about fifteen years now." A dimple pops deep in his cheek, and I'm reminded of the easy way he used to smile. Before we both married our jobs, when we still thought the world was ours for the taking and had no idea we'd be working eighty-hour weeks to get it.

Another yawn escapes my lips. I've got one week to enjoy this freedom, and I'm not about to give up a whole day going to bed already. "Okay. How about we go downstairs and grab a drink and something to eat? Because if I sit down on that bed, I'm going to be dead to the world for at least twelve hours. You better feed me before that happens."

"Lead the way, doc."

Chapter Three

SKYLAR

AS WE ENTER THE RESTAURANT AND ASK THE HOSTESS FOR A TABLE FOR two on the beach, Hunter's brother, Gabe, and a woman I assume is his fiancée, Avery, step up behind us. Gabe and Hunt do the half-hug, fist to the back thing men like to do, and I wait my turn. When Gabe pulls away from Hunter, he picks me up and hugs me until I laugh and hug him back.

"Alright, you can put her down now," Hunter growls, and Gabe laughs. Then he puts me back on my feet and wraps his arm tightly around his stunning fiancée. "Guys, I want you to meet Avery."

Hunter hugs her and cocks an eyebrow at his brother. "You sure you know what you're doing, Avery? Gabe always used to hog the bed."

"At least I wasn't still pissing the bed in my twenties." Gabe punches Hunt's shoulder, and I snort out a laugh, then cover my mouth.

"Oh my god. Do you remember that?" Both brothers played football in college, so whenever they'd get together during the off-season, there was always a party to go with it.

"I was drunk and spilled my drink," Hunter tries to defend himself, and Gabe laughs.

Avery's eyes ping-pong between the three of us before landing on me. "Oh, I bet you've got some good stories."

The hostess comes over to ask if we want to increase the number of people who'll be in our party.

"Four, please." I smile, and Avery and I link arms. "I have so many stories about these two."

By the end of the night, I've had a few too many key lime pie martinis, but I've laughed harder than I have in years. My cheeks hurt from smiling so hard, and I absolutely love Gabe's fiancée. The two of them are perfect for each other. And I'm a teensy bit jealous. And a tiny bit drunk.

Well . . . maybe more than a tiny bit.

"Come on, Skye. This is our floor." Hunter tugs on my arm, prompting me to leave the elevator, but the wall is just so damn comfy. "No, you go. I'm good here." I pat the wall next to me and close my eyes as powerful arms wrap around me.

Hunt scoops me up like a groom ready to carry his bride across the threshold. I throw my arms around his neck and rest my head against his shoulder. "No sleeping in the elevator, doc."

"Right. We've got a gigantic bed to share."

He carries me to our room and through the suite, then sits me down on the bed.

"Can you untie my shoe for me?" I kick my leg up and twirl my red espadrille with ribbons tied around my ankle into the air and let the rest of my body fall back on the bed. Then I add a "Please?" for good measure.

Hunter carefully unlaces one shoe. His hands linger on the skin of my bare calf before switching to the other foot. Once both shoes drop to the floor, he stands and stares down at me and groans. "Don't you want to get changed, Skye?"

"I guess." I hold my arm out for him, and he pulls me back up so I'm standing next to the bed with his strong arms holding me still. But I just want to lie back down, so I pull my sundress up over my head, throw it on the floor, then lie back down and close my eyes.

"Skye." Hunter's voice is strained.

I open my eyes, definitely drunk and getting annoyed with him for not letting me sleep. "What?"

"You're naked." He's looking at the wall. Not at me. Every muscle in his body seems to be strung like the string of a guitar waiting to be played.

Or snapped.

I take a quick peek to confirm I'm not naked. I mean, I know I'm drunk, but I didn't think I was *that* drunk. Turns out I'm not. "I have on a strapless bra and panties, Hunt."

"Jesus Christ," he grunts, then tosses a t-shirt at me. "Can you put that on for me?"

"Fine." I slip the soft cotton over my head and inhale Hunter's masculine scent, then unhook my bra and throw it at his feet. "There. Better?"

Hunter turns around and walks out of the room, mumbling something about strength, as I close my eyes and drift off to sleep in seconds.

Chapter Four

HUNTER

HOW CAN ONE TINY WOMAN BE SUCH A TREMENDOUS PAIN IN MY ASS? Although it's not really my ass that hurts right now. My dick, however, fucking aches. I almost forgot what it's like to laugh all night with Skylar. It's been so long since we've been able to do it. Her warped sense of humor always made me laugh. And her raspy laugh always turned me the fuck on.

Even when it wasn't supposed to. Before and after, she belonged to someone else.

But fuck, not as much as her stripping down to a tiny white strapless bra and sheer thong and then getting huffy when I threw a damn shirt at her to put on. I'm strong, but even *I'm* not strong enough to sleep next to her dressed like that and not want to bury myself inside her.

I turn on the hot water in the shower and strip down, kicking my clothes to the corner of the room. Once I'm under the scalding spray, I wrap my hand around my cock and picture Skye lying on the bed, her strawberry-blonde curls fanned out behind her. Her perfect fucking tits are high and tight, plumping out of the top of her white bra.

The curve of her hip.

The dip of her stomach.

Jesus.

My grip tightens, and my movements pick up speed. I close my eyes and picture her soft curves. The sheer, white lace panties covering her fucking bare pussy. Fuck me. I groan as her name

leaves my lips and let the shower wash away the hot spurts of come as I jerk my cock.

"Hunter?"

What the hell?

The door Skye just pushed through bounces off the wall behind her.

"Oh, God. I'm gonna be sick." Skylar stumbles to the toilet and lifts the lid before she heaves.

I grab the towel and wrap it around my waist, then step out of the shower and gather her long hair in my hands.

Her fingers grip the toilet, and she heaves again. Her entire body shakes, and I'm a little impressed that such a small person can make the noise she's making. But when she finally stops and leans her cheek against her hand, looking up at me, the tears in her eyes do me in.

"Skye, tell me what you need, sweetheart." I grab a washcloth from the counter and quickly run it under the faucet, then gently wipe her face before laying it on the back of her neck.

She whimpers. "Please, just go in the other room. I don't want you to see me like this."

"Not a chance, doc. How many times did you take care of me after a game? I'm not leaving you alone."

Skye doesn't have a chance to argue with me before she's throwing up again. "It had to be the milk in the martinis." She grabs the damp rag from her neck and holds it up to her mouth. "It had to have been." Her stomach makes an awful noise, and she hides her face from me. "Please, Hunter. Just go to bed. I'm fine."

"I'm going to pull on some pants and see if there's any ginger ale in the cabinet. It might help settle your stomach. I'll be right back."

She nods, and I dart out of the room.

Not exactly how I was expecting this night to go, but I've had worse. Once I throw pajama pants on and don't run the risk of flashing her my dick, I find a can of ginger ale and bring it back into the bathroom. Skye's lying on the floor, curled up in a ball.

"You want to try lying in bed?"

She shakes her head, then moans at the movement.

Carefully, I sit down next to her, gently place her head on my lap, and run my fingers through her hair until she falls asleep. After about twenty minutes, I figure it's safe to put her back to bed and lay

her down, then climb in behind her with every intention of being a perfect gentleman and hugging my side of the bed. But Skye rolls over immediately and buries her head in my chest, then wraps her arm around my waist, so I don't move.

I don't touch her.

Reminding myself that she's drunk and sick, and I'm not an asshole.

But damn, she's making it hard.

Chapter Five

SKYLAR

WHEN I WAKE UP MONDAY MORNING, I FEEL LIKE I'VE JUST FINISHED working a forty-eight-hour shift with no sleep and back-to-back traumas in the ER. But I'm warm and so comfy. My body is cocooned by powerful arms, and my bottom snuggles against something deliciously hard. It takes my brain a minute or five to catch up before I realize it's Hunter's hard body.

Then the night before comes rushing back to me, and oh dear god.

I want to die.

I threw up in front of Hunter Carter . . . more than once.

Oh no . . . No. No. No.

I think I stripped in front of him.

I cover my face with my hands, the action sending lightning bolts through my already throbbing head, and moan. Then I carefully extricate myself from his arms to search for some Advil and water. But first, I stop and take a moment to appreciate the man in my bed because while sleeping in bed with him will be happening all week, sleeping wrapped in his arms won't. It can't for the sake of my sanity.

I can handle flirty Hunter.

I'm used to sweet Hunter.

What I can't wrap my brain around is waking up in his arms and how much I already crave to do it again.

And after a few more minutes of his hard body pressed against me, I can't promise myself I wouldn't have taken advantage of the

situation and finally lived out some of my favorite college fantasies. And there were a whole lot of those fantasies back in the day.

Maybe even one or two that still creep in every once and a while.

After two Advil, one glass of water, more toothpaste than was necessary, and a piping hot shower, I feel half human again. Not good but good enough. I grab one of the plush robes from the bathroom closet and wrap the tie around my waist before walking into the empty bedroom.

The bed is already made, and the clothes I left on the floor last night have been picked up and folded. They're stacked neatly on the chair next to the open balcony door, where the curtain is blowing in the breeze. I follow the warm ocean breeze out onto the balcony and find Hunter leaning against it. His shiny black basketball shorts hang loosely from his hips, and a white muscle tank covers his chest, leaving only the corded muscles of his arms showing. And hel-lo, arm porn.

"See something you like, doc?"

I look away, totally busted as my cheeks flame in embarrassment.

Instead of answering, I stand next to him and look out at the turquoise ocean below for a few minutes. "I'm sorry about last night. I can't believe it hit me like that."

"Don't worry about it. How are you feeling today?"

I nervously pull my robe tighter. "Better." I turn to face him, then admit, "Mortified."

"Nothing to be upset about. You got a little drunk. It happens to the best of us." He gives me a tight smile. "I'm going for a run." He finally looks at me. "Wanna join me?"

My stomach roils at the thought of running right now.

Hunter must understand my reaction because he runs his hand down my arm and squeezes my hand with a devilish smile. "Okay well, I ordered some breakfast. It should be here soon. Try to eat some grease and let it soak up the alcohol from last night. It'll make you feel better. Then you can sleep it off on the beach." Hunter walks through the door, and I call after him.

"You know the grease thing isn't medically proven to work, right?"

"Try it, doc. Bacon fixes everything."

How the heck does he look like that if bacon fixes everything?

I lie down on the chaise lounge and soak in the morning sun until a knock at the door pulls me from my peace and quiet a little while later.

The bellhop pushes in a cart covered in silver-domed trays. I thank him as he places the trays on the table, then peek under the domes. Hunter wasn't lying when he said he ordered grease. Eggs. Bacon. Sausage. With a side of sugar in the form of Belgian waffles. Good grief, he can't possibly eat like this and look like that.

I grab a slice of bacon, then decide Hunter was right about one thing. I'm not wasting one of my precious few days in the sand and sun sitting inside. I might not move fast doing it, but I change into my electric-blue bikini and add my cute, sheer white cover-up over it. The tassels at the bottom tickle my legs as I slide into my flip flops and start throwing everything I need into my beach bag. By the time I've tamed my crazy curls and packed up the essentials, Hunter walks through the door of the suite, his beautifully bronzed skin dripping in sweat and his dark-brown hair damp and plastered to his head.

I can't tear my eyes away.

I scan his chest and abs, following every sinewy line and indent down. My fingers itch to trace the light dusting of hair dipping under the waistband of his shorts.

I work with the human body for a living, but they never look as delectable as his.

"Hey, doc. We going to the beach?" He chugs a bottle of water from the minibar, then grabs a piece of bacon. "Give me a minute to shower, and I'll come down with you. Unless you want to join me?" A flirty grin crosses his sexy face.

He waits a beat as I stare at him.

"I already showered." *Great answer, Skylar.* Really convincing.

"Suit yourself." Hunt walks into the bedroom, and I hear the shower turn on.

Sweet Jesus. It's like college all over again. Except rather than being able to successfully hide how badly I want him, I'm spending a week fake dating him.

Chapter Six

HUNTER

AFTER SPENDING AN ENTIRE NIGHT WITH SKYLAR'S BODY WRAPPED around me, I had two options. The first was to wake her up with my face buried between her thighs, then take what I wanted. Which was Skylar . . . Sometime around two a.m., when I was still awake with her body draped over mine, the soft skin of her leg thrown over my thigh and her knee grazing my dick, the realization came crashing down over me like a ten-ton weight falling forty stories down. The woman in my arms has been my best friend for over ten years. She's been the one I've called first for the bad and the good, even when we were an entire country apart. I've fucking hated every guy she's ever dated and was relieved when she stopped dating all together in med school. And in the back of my head, I may have compared every woman I've dated to her too. Something I've been accused of doing a few times over the years by an angry girlfriend or two. But when it came down to them or Skye, she would always be my choice.

No one has ever lived up to the bar she sets.

No one ever can.

Because they're not her.

But waking her up and professing my love wasn't the right move. Not after she spent the night drunk and sick. And not after the way she put us in the *friend zone* in the first place.

After Rick the Dick, I somehow turned into the person she'd talk with about guys. Wanting my opinion on what they wanted or what they meant. Should she go to the formal with this guy or bring that one to one of my games? It was fucking torture. You don't ask a guy you're into those kinds of questions.

Fucking. Friend. Zone.

Even if that's not what I've ever wanted.

So that left me with option two.

Suck it the fuck up and come up with a plan to get out of the friend zone.

Easier said than done. I've never been much of a planner. But I wasn't getting much sleep with her breasts pressed against my chest and my shirt shoved up between us after it rode up her body. I got even less when she rolled over and curled her perfect ass, covered only in a tiny lace thong, up against me. Leaving me a whole lot of time to think about it.

Skye doesn't deserve games.

She deserves a man who isn't too chickenshit to tell her how he feels or what he wants.

So today isn't going to be about games.

No. Today will be an excruciating lesson in foreplay.

Once I've showered and changed into my board shorts, I text my brother to see what he's up to today, then text one of my players to see if he's made it to the resort yet. Miles Hensley's known Gabe's fiancée, Avery, for years. He and his twin sister grew up with her and the best man in some no-name, tiny town in Tennessee. He's the quarterback for the Phoenix Dragons, and he's been my client for a few years. Never would have figured he'd be a guest at my brother's wedding, but stranger things have happened.

When I emerge from the bedroom, Skylar's adding a few bottles of water to her straw bag. "You ready to go, doc?"

"I sure am. If you put your phone away. Remember, this is a vacation." Her smile stretches across her beautiful face, and something settles in my chest. I shove my phone into my pocket, and any hesitation I may have been battling gets tossed aside. I know what I need to do.

Mind made up, I take two long strides toward her before a knock on the door interrupts me.

Pivoting, I open the door, and my dick deflates when my mom throws her arms around me. "Hunter William Carter." She tightens

her grip. "How could you get in last night and not come see your mother?"

Dad inches by us and pats me on the back, then gives me a look that says, "*Humor your mother or deal with me.*" He nods his head, greeting me as he walks by.

"I wrap my arms around my mom and relax into her. "Hi, Momma."

She pulls back and smacks my chest. "Don't you 'Hi, Momma' me, mister. And where's Skylar?" She steps by me and scans the room until her eyes land on Skye. "Oh, honey. You get prettier every time I see you." She rushes to Skye and wraps her up in a big hug. "Isn't she darling, dear?"

"Pretty as a peach." Dad gives me the look.

He does a lot of talking with his eyes since Mom doesn't let him get a word in most of the time.

Mom sits down on the couch, pulling Skye down next to her. "I swear, I've known you and Hunter were meant for each other since the first time we met you at one of his games. You were with that other boy, but I saw the way my Hunter looked at you. A mother knows these things."

What the hell? Could she lay it on any thicker?

"Oh, that's so sweet, Mrs. Carter." Skye's golden brown eyes nervously meet mine.

Shit. I think she wants help.

"So, Mom. Dad. What are you two crazy kids up to today? I'll bet Gabe's got you booked all week, doesn't he?"

"Nonsense." She pauses for a half second. "Well yes, Gabriel does have a full agenda for us. But I'm sure we can find some time to spend together. I want to hear all about what you've been up to these last few years, Skylar. I mean, you're a real-life brain surgeon. Is it anything like they make it look on *Grey's Anatomy*?" Mom raises her hand to her face and lowers her voice to whisper, "Do the doctors really have that much sex in the hospital closets?"

For fuck's sake . . . They better not.

"Umm. No?" Skye's face turns as red as the roses on my mom's shirt. "I mean, no. Not that I know of. But you know, it's not like anybody's having sex with me, so . . ." She turns to me and mouths, "*Help.*"

"You know what? Skye and I were just headed to the beach to relax for a bit. How about we catch up with you guys later?" I jump up and take a step toward the door when Mom throws her arms around Skye again.

"I'm so glad you're here, Skylar. It's going to be such an incredible week." Mom stands and claps her hands. "Both my boys are finally in good places with good women. My work is done." She cups my face in her hand and pulls me down to her. "Don't mess this up, Hunter. She's a keeper." Her hand smooths gently along my cheek before she kisses me goodbye.

Dad claps me on the back. "I'll see you tomorrow night at the bachelor party, and I'll try to get your mother to give you some space this week. But I'm not a miracle worker, Hunter. She misses you. Make some time for her, son." He closes the door behind them, and I'm left standing there, feeling like an asshole.

Chapter Seven

SKYLAR

"HEY. YOU OKAY?" HUNT LOOKS A LITTLE OFF-BALANCE AFTER THE ball of energy that is his mother just whirled through the door.

"Yeah. I'm good. She's just . . . I love my mom, but she's a lot sometimes. Sorry about the whole hospital-sex thing." He drags his hand down his face, and I have the urge to tell him the only sex I'm thinking about is with him.

Instead, I grab my bag and hat from the floor. "Come on. Let's go see if we can find some beach chairs under one of those umbrellas they put up this morning."

A moment later when the elevator door closes behind us, Hunt turns to me and plants one of his hands against the wall next to my head. "You know . . ." The doors open one floor down, and a sweet-looking elderly couple gets on with us, followed by a young family with two small kids. One of the kids smacks Hunter's leg with a blow-up shark, and Hunt blows out a frustrated breath as he takes a step back.

By the time we all get to the lobby, Hunter's playing peek-a-boo with the toddler, eliciting full-blown belly laughs from the little man, and I think I'm in love.

With the kid and the man.

I try to shake those thoughts from my mind as we walk through the lobby to the sand beyond the pool. "Look over there. There are still a few umbrellas with empty chairs." I point to my right, but Hunter takes my arm and tugs me left toward the small grass cabanas.

"We don't need an umbrella, doc. I know how you are about the sun, so I rented a cabana for the day while I was on my run earlier." He guides me to one of the small wooden cabanas with a thatched roof and billowing sheer white curtains. It's got a daybed for two in the center, sitting on a raised wooden floor, and two wooden lounge chairs sit in the sand in front of it.

"Hunter . . . This is perfect." I lift up on my toes, feeling bold, and kiss his cheek. "Thank you." Once I step up onto the cabana floor, I kick off my flip-flops and pull my cover-up over my head. Then, deciding bold felt good, I bend over at the waist, so my ass is high in the air, pointed right at Hunter, and search around in my bag for an extra minute or two before pulling out the sunscreen that was in my hand the entire time and turning around. "Hey, could you put this on my back for me? You know how I burn."

Hunt's mouth hangs wide open, and I feel slightly less bad about being caught gawking earlier at his body. Because he is definitely staring right now. His eyes caress my skin like a familiar lover, and desire pools deep in my belly, mixing with a happy dose of satisfaction as I watch his eyes dilate with need before he slowly reaches out his hand and takes the lotion from me.

"Sure." He clears his throat. "Lie down."

I do as I'm told and lie down on the daybed, then untie the thick strap of my bikini top and move my hands down by my sides before turning my face to look at him. "Thank you. The curse of the red head. Fair skin burns like a bitch."

He squeezes the tube of lotion between his hands, then rubs them together before those firm hands start at my neck. His thumbs dig into my muscles, and his fingers dip down the front of my shoulders, grazing my collarbone but not going further, before working their way down my back. Tracing my sides and hips. His thumbs trail down my spine and dig into the two dimples above my bottom, and I wiggle, trying to hide how desperate I already am for relief.

He rubs down the backs of both of my legs, and I swear he growls when his hands work their way back up and trace the seam of my bikini bottoms. Forcing myself not to moan under his hands might be harder than when I took my med school exams.

I reach back and re-tie my suit, then flip over and sit up. "Thanks, Hunt. I can do my front."

"No. I wouldn't want you to miss a spot, Skye." He squeezes more sunscreen into his hands, then runs them up both my legs before I take the lotion from the cushion and do my stomach and chest myself. Spreading my legs, I pat the spot between them. "Sit down, so I can do your back too."

He sits down and leans his arms back behind him. "I hate this stuff," Hunt complains like a big baby.

I run my lotion covered hands over his broad shoulders and down the corded muscles of his arms, then over his tapered back and down the top of his broad shorts, loving the feel of the strength he holds under his skin.

Once he's done, he lies down next to me. Dark sunglasses cover his handsome face. "Tell me something, Skye."

I angle my wide-brimmed straw hat to shade my face and wait him out.

"Why have you not been in a serious relationship since college?" He leaves his glasses on, shielding his eyes, blocking any chance I have to read his face.

"I don't know. I guess I just never felt like it was a priority. The priority was med school, and then my residency and fellowship. I think if I'd met the right person, I would have made time. But I never found them." I roll to the side. "What about you? I think you've had a new girlfriend every six months these past few years."

"I guess I was looking for something that none of them had."

I don't ask what he was looking for. Instead, I bury my head in the sand.

Metaphorically. I stretch out on my stomach and close my eyes instead of pushing harder for an answer. Nervous I might not like the answer.

I'm not sure what I'm more scared of . . .

What he might say or what he might not.

Chapter Eight

HUNTER

I'M NOT SURE ANYONE CAN ENJOY LYING ON A CHAIR, BAKING IN THE sun all day. Maybe it's because I grew up in Florida, so sun and sand are something I take for granted, but after an hour of lounging on my ass and reading the newspaper cover to cover—something I haven't done in . . . well, ever—I glance over at the sleeping beauty next to me and decide she looks too peaceful to wake.

It's been a while since I've had the chance to swim in a warm ocean. I like to compete in a few Ironman triathlons a year, but the water off the coast of New York, or hell, the one I did in Maine last year, was about twenty degrees colder than this is. Either way, it'll help me burn off some of this pent-up energy and give me some space to figure my shit out.

I want her. There's no question Skye and I are attracted to each other. And I've loved her for years. Not as a sister. That'd be fucking gross because Skye has never inspired brotherly feelings from me. But I know it's still love. I'd do anything for her. Drop anything for her. Risk anything for her. The question is, would I risk *her*?

If we try this and it goes to shit, will I lose her?

Who am I kidding? If we try this . . . really, finally fucking give us a chance, there'd be no going back. And I wouldn't want to. Not if I had her by my side. In my bed. In my life.

With my mind made up, I swim back to shore and find Skye awake, digging her toes into the sand as the waves lap at her feet. Her creamy skin is a stark contrast to her bright-blue bikini that matches the ocean. Her strawberry-blonde hair catches in the light breeze blowing behind her, and she takes my breath away.

And I can't miss the way her eyes light up when she sees me.

"Hey, you're awake." I shake my wet hair out like a dog and watch her squirm as droplets dance over her warm skin, then hold my hand out for her. "Wanna come in with me? The water's perfect today."

Skye plants her hands on her hips, looking every bit the cheerleader she once was. "You know I can't swim, Hunt."

Fuck it.

I lift her off her feet and carry her a few feet out.

"Oh my god. Put me down, Hunter. What the hell?" Her small fists pound against my shoulders, and from this position, my face is practically nestled between her perfectly plumped boobs being held by a thick blue tie around her neck and another behind her back.

"Okay, doc." I lower her feet into the water but don't let go. "I'll put you down."

She clings to my neck as soon as her feet touch the water. "No, wait . . . Don't. Don't put me down." She wraps her legs around my waist as I move further into the ocean, refusing to loosen her grip even though I'm only waist-deep. I keep going until we're deeper. Until the water covers both of us up to my chest, and I have to jump over a wave, getting Skye's face wet. Making sure we're deep enough so she can't let go.

I keep one arm around her waist and push her wet hair away from her face.

"I'm going to kill you, Hunter," she tells me with laughter lacing her voice.

"I'm going to kiss you, Skylar."

She gasps, then her face transforms into a seductive smile as she runs a thumb along my cheek. "What are you waiting for?"

That. Permission. That was all I was waiting for.

But I've waited over ten years to take Skylar Fischer, to make her mine. I'm not rushing this. I hold the back of her head with my free hand and slowly brush my lips over hers. Once. Twice. Then I slant my mouth and take. Skye sighs as my tongue slips past her pouty lips and pushes inside. Long-held lust bubbles to the surface, straining against my skin, trying to break free. But I force it down and take my time. Learning her taste, her mouth, her breath. What makes her writhe. How her breath hitches when I tug her bottom lip

between my teeth, and she rubs herself against my growing cock beneath the warm water.

A wave crashes against my back, and I stumble forward, breaking our kiss but not letting her go.

Skye yelps and tightens her body against mine.

"I've got you. You're safe."

Her soft golden-brown eyes stare back at me, big and wide and so fucking trusting. "I know you do. You always have, Hunt."

"And I always will, Skye." I take her mouth again, this time crushing my lips against hers.

She moans, then pulls back and leans her head against mine. "Hunter . . . People can see."

"Let them," I pant, needing more than I can take here.

"Not here, Hunt. We've waited over ten years—" She cuts herself off, then whispers, "I've waited . . ."

"You were right the first time, Skye. We've both waited. I've wanted you since I first laid eyes on you, but Rick beat me to it. Beat me to you. By the time you two broke up, you and I were friends. But I've always wanted you."

"You've got a funny way of showing it, Hunt. You've never been hurting for women. I think I lost count of the number of girlfriends you've had." A flash of hurt crosses her face before she masks it.

She's not wrong.

"We never seemed to be in the same place at the same time before. But we are now." I'm trying to explain my feelings, but I'm fucking it all up.

"So, I'm convenient?" She tries to drop her feet to the ocean floor, then pulls her legs back up. "Can you please take me back to the beach?"

"Skylar . . ." I walk back up to the shallows and drop her legs down to where she feels safe. "I didn't mean it like that."

She quickly escapes the ocean, then turns toward me. "I'm sure you didn't. I just need a little space, okay?"

I nod and watch her as she goes back up to the cabana and gathers her things before she disappears from my sight.

Chapter Nine

SKYLAR

I FANTASIZED ABOUT KISSING HUNTER FOR YEARS, NOT SURE IT WOULD ever truly happen, but knowing if it did, it would be earth-shattering. It was that and more. Having his lips on mine, feeling him grow hard against me. Knowing he was as desperate as I was . . . It was everything.

And then he had to go and speak.

For a man who has to speak eloquently as a lawyer and convincingly as an agent, he sure knows how to put his big, fat foot in his mouth when it matters. And I know I matter. Hunter's actions have shown me that over and over through the years. But seriously . . . I'm not a convenience.

I bump into Mrs. Carter when I walk back into the hotel. "Oh, I'm so glad to see you, Skye. I meant to ask you earlier if you'd join me tomorrow. I want to do a little shopping, and my husband hates to shop. I'd love it if you'd come with me. It'll give us some time to catch up. I don't think I've seen you since Hunter graduated from law school."

"Thank you. That sounds like fun. I'd love to come." I'm not someone who usually likes to spend hours shopping, but I usually don't have hours to kill either.

"Great." She claps her hands together, then squeezes me in a bear hug. "See you then."

As I make my way back up to our suite, I try to decide what I feel like doing. Sitting in the room sulking isn't an option. When I walk into the room, I drop my sandy bag on the balcony and quickly rinse

off in the shower, then put on a stretchy cotton tank dress and toss my wet hair up in a bun.

Screw this. I'm going to go explore the resort myself.

I leave a note for Hunter and wander around for the next hour, checking out the restaurant, the shops, and finally the spa. One facial, a manicure, pedicure, and one Turkish Hamam Rub and Scrub later, and I've been exfoliated to within an inch of my life. My skin is glowing, my bright pink toes and fingers look prettier than they have in years, and I no longer want to equally kiss and kill Hunter.

By the time I get back up to the room, the sun is beginning to dip lower in the sky, and Hunter's standing on the balcony. A pair of khaki cargo shorts hang from his lean hips, and a short sleeve, pale-green linen shirt stretches across his broad chest. When he turns to face me, his face relaxes. "You're back?"

"Did you think I was flying home? I left you a note." There's an awkward energy in the air, something that's never been there before between the two of us.

"I got it. I just wasn't sure . . . I'm sorry, Skylar. I didn't mean to imply that you were convenient. Nothing about us has ever been convenient."

I gasp, not sure I like what he's saying now any better than what he said earlier.

"No. Jesus. That's not what I meant." His hands frame each side of my face. "Listen to me. You and I have never been convenient. We've always been so much more. You were the first person I told when I got accepted into NYU. You were the first person I called when I signed my first client. When I want to share something with someone, it's you I want to talk to. It's always been you." He closes the distance between us, but instead of pressing his lips against mine, they linger on my forehead. "Come out with me tonight. Let's go watch the sunset on Mallory Square, then get some dinner."

I lick my lips. "Like a date?"

"Not *like* a date, doc. A date. You and me. What do you say?"

"I'd like that." I step back. "Just let me change."

Hunter drops his hands from my face, and I immediately feel the loss and want it back.

I may add an extra sway to my steps as I walk away, knowing he's watching.

Hoping he aches the way I do.

Chapter Ten

HUNTER

I BUMPED INTO AVERY'S UNCLE LUKE THIS AFTERNOON AND HAD AN enlightening conversation with him. He's about ten years older than me, single, wealthy, and if I had to wager a guess, lonely as shit. From the outside looking in, the guy's got everything he wants and lives life on his own terms, but I'm pretty sure he's missing something.

I think he knows it too.

It's easy to make a quick comparison. I'm thirty-two. I've achieved every goal I've ever set for myself, but my life feels empty. It's missing something. And I have no doubt that something is the woman holding my hand as we watch the street performers dance with flaming sticks in front of us in Mallory Square. We haven't talked about what happened earlier. Just enjoyed the night. Grabbing something to eat from one of the many food trucks we passed by while we walk around taking in all the sights and sounds.

"Oh, let's stop there and get ice cream." Skylar tugs on my hand and drags me to a small shop on the corner of the square. "Hmm. I want to try a key lime pie cone. What are you going to get?"

"I'd have thought you'd steer far away from key lime pie after your martinis last night."

She swats at my chest. "Stop. There's no alcohol in this, smart ass."

When the young woman comes to the window, I order our cones, and we sit on a bench and watch the sun slip down in the water-colored sky and disappear behind the end of the world. The sunset

here really is something to be seen. By the time it vanishes, Skye is leaning against me, yawning. "You ready to head back?"

"Yeah. I guess I didn't get the greatest sleep last night."

I groan, remembering exactly what her body felt like against mine while I didn't sleep last night. I try to hide my reaction by standing and pulling her up against my side but never letting go of her hand.

The walk back to the hotel doesn't take long, and with every step we take closer to our room, the air grows thicker around us.

Her body brushes my side, and my dick jumps.

My thumb rubs a circle against the skin of her hand, and goosebumps break out along her flesh.

By the time we push through the door, my need is warring with want and desire. And my sanity is being held together by a string that's growing weaker by the moment.

Fraying.

On the verge of snapping.

I let the door swing closed behind us and haul Skye up against the wall, my mouth claiming hers. "Tell me if you don't want this," I pant, then lick up the length of her neck. "I'll stop now." I nip at her earlobe, then run my tongue over the shell, and she shivers in my arms. "What do you want, Skylar?" My hand traces down the curves of her body, stopping on her hip and fisting the soft material of her dress.

Skye drops her head against the wall behind her and grabs my face in her hands. "I want this, Hunt. I want you." She links her hands behind my neck and crushes her mouth against mine. "I want everything." She rubs her body against me, and I slide my hands under her legs and carry her into the dark bedroom.

Once I lay her on the bed, she pulls her dress over her head, slower this time and with much more intent than last night. The yellow material falls to the floor, and Skye leans up on her elbows. Matching sheer yellow lace covers her breasts and pussy. "So fucking pretty." My eyes rake over her skin before I add my shirt and shorts to our pile, then climb onto the bed. One knee next to her, my hand on the back of her head, and her hair wrapped around my fist, I fuck her mouth with mine the way I'm going to fuck her pussy with my tongue.

I drop my hips to hers, and hers rise to meet mine.

Taunting.

Teasing.

Hungry for more.

For everything.

I lick my way down her body and cup her creamy breasts with my hands as my mouth takes her peaked nipple. I tug at it through the cup of her sheer bra before pulling the cups down and plumping her breasts. She moans when my teeth tug her hard peak, so I do the same to the other. My mouth travels down lower, my tongue dipping into her belly button, then around her toned stomach as she quivers beneath me until I grab her panties with both hands and rip them from her body.

With a deep breath, I inhale her spicy scent, and a primal need dances down my spine.

This woman is mine.

I run my index finger over the lips of her bare sex and trace the small strip of reddish-blond hair. "So fucking sexy."

Skylar's thighs shake as my thumbs part her sex, and I get my first glimpse of her aching, needy clit, just begging to be sucked. Hard. One teasing swipe of my tongue and her back bows off the bed as she keens.

"Ohmygod, Hunter . . ."

"That's right, Skye. Your voice is going to be hoarse from screaming my name by the time we're done tonight." I drop my face to her drenched pussy and fucking devour her. Her thighs wrap around my head, and her hands tug at my hair as I lap at her, my tongue dipping inside her pussy. Fucking her hard and fast, then sliding a finger inside and curling it against her walls while I finally suck that pretty little clit into my mouth.

Skye shoots straight up off the bed and comes on a loud scream, exploding around me.

I feel her toes curling next to me, and I swear to God, if I don't get inside her right now, I might actually fucking die.

Chapter Eleven

SKYLAR

STARS DETONATE BEHIND MY EYES, AND THE MOST POWERFUL ORGASM I've ever experienced rips through me.

My god.

I pull at Hunter's face until he climbs back up my body and kisses me. The taste of me on his lips and his tongue might be the sexiest thing I've ever tasted. My fingers smooth down his back and hook in his boxers. I start to push them over his hips when the shrill sound of a phone ringing from the other room registers in my sex-fogged brain.

My hands stop mid-movement, and I turn my face away from his. "Shit, Hunt. I've got to answer that. It's the hospital's ringtone."

He lifts his big body off mine. "Seriously? You're on vacation."

"I know. That's why I've got to get that. They know it too. It must be serious." I place my palm flat against his chest and push until he moves, then scramble to find my phone.

"Hello?" I stand in the living room, naked except for my bra, which no longer covers my breasts. No doubt looking utterly ridiculous.

"Doctor Fischer, it's Doctor DiMarino. I'm sorry to bother you, but I thought you'd want to know Danny Munson came in tonight."

Marc DiMarino fills me in on the events of the night and how my favorite little guy is now being prepped for surgery, a surgery we were hoping to avoid for another year at least.

Hunter comes in and drapes a robe over my shoulders, then sits down and watches me as I process everything I'm being told.

"Thanks, Marc. I appreciate it. I agree that's our best plan of action now. It should be me in the OR, but honestly, you've got more experience with this."

I listen for another minute before he hangs up the phone, and then I drop down next to Hunter. "A patient of mine came into the ER tonight after a grand mal seizure. We've been monitoring an aneurysm that was too risky to attempt removing, and it just ruptured. I don't know whether they'll be able to save him." I lay my head against Hunter's chest. "I fucking hate this part of my job. This kid is twelve years old."

"Oh, baby." He wraps his arm around me and holds me while I cry. I know I've got to harden myself to this aspect of my job, but I haven't managed to do that just yet.

Hunter stays with me on the couch all night with the television on, and we both doze on and off, waiting for the call back from the hospital to hear how the surgery I should be doing myself goes.

A few texts come in from the nursing staff, keeping me updated, until I finally get the call nearly eight hours later and learn that Danny is stable and in recovery. The next forty-eight hours are critical. They'll determine the rest of his life. But he pulled through the surgery.

His family gets to have hope.

And with hope, anything is possible.

When I place the phone on the table, Hunter stands and holds out his hands to me. "Come on, doc. Let's go to bed. You need sleep."

I place my palm in his and follow him into the room, then grab one of his t-shirts from the chair where he's left a few pieces of clothing and slide it over my body.

Hunter pulls the blanket back on the bed, and I crawl in and wait for him to follow. But first, he closes the room-darkening curtains and the bedroom door. Then he climbs in next to me and wraps me up in his arms. My head rests on his chest, and my eyes grow heavy as Hunter's hand holds me to him. And I realize I've never felt so cared for in my life. This man, who's always been my best friend, is so much more. I think he always has been, but I've been too scared to admit it.

Hunter's lips press down against my head, and I close my eyes, and let sleep, real sleep, take me under.

When I wake up later, I feel like I've slept for days.
My body aches like I've been lying down for too long.
And when I reach my arm out, I'm met with cold sheets.
What time is it?

I reach over to the nightstand to check the time on my phone, but it's not there either.

After I throw the covers off, I pad into the bathroom and brush my teeth, then go searching for Hunter and come up empty. But there's a note on the counter.

Skye –

My mom called earlier to see what time you wanted to go shopping. I told her you were sleeping, and somehow I've been forced to be her shopping buddy for the day. You owe me, and I have all sorts of ideas for ways you can make it up to me.

-Hunter

P.S. Don't forget the bachelor and bachelorette parties are tonight.

I search for my phone and see it's already two o'clock in the afternoon, and I've slept away half the day. For a hot minute, I contemplate going right back to bed. But it's already Tuesday, and I don't want to waste away any more of my day. I'm okay with relaxing, but it needs to be in the sun, not in my dark bedroom.

As a plan forms in my mind, I order some room service, change into a bikini, and gather my beach bag and my kindle, taking it all out onto the balcony. Once my chair is covered by an oversized towel, I spray myself down with sunscreen, then tuck that bad boy away. No need for Hunter to know I didn't really need his help yesterday. Then I lie down and bring up the latest football romance by my new favorite author, Natalie Grace.

A few hours later, I'm warm, relaxed, and totally lost in a book about horny teenagers at an elite prep school. Boys did not look the way these boys do back when I was in school.

The sound of the door opening catches my attention, and I look through the glass doors to see Hunter walking in. Another pair of cargo shorts hangs down his muscular thighs, and a white t-shirt stretches across his broad chest. He doesn't see me and turns down the hall toward the bedroom before coming back out a few minutes later and spotting me on the balcony.

"Hey, doc." He leans down, and with one hand wrapped around the back of my neck, he sears my lips with his.

It's quick but intense.

A promise of what's to come, and I'm ready for it all.

"How was shopping with your momma?" I swing my legs down and pat the chair next to me for him to sit.

Hunter glances down at my Kindle instead, then picks it up. "You know, her husband is a pro football player. Actually, half her family is. They're my clients."

"You're kidding."

He gives me a cocky grin, then hands me back the Kindle. "Nope. That girl's family is football's royal family." Hunt leans against the balcony, assessing me. "Are you going to go to the bachelorette party?"

I shake my head. "I think I'm just going to stay in tonight. I don't know anyone but Avery. And honestly, I'm in a zen kinda mood. I don't think I'm up for a bar tonight. But you need to go and have fun."

He cups my face and runs his thumb over my cheekbone. "Okay. I'm going to jump in the shower before I meet the guys. Care to join me?"

I smack my hand against his chest. "No. Now go shower."

Hunter's brown eyes smolder down at me. "Okay, Skylar." His voice is raspy. Forced. Like he wants to say more but doesn't. Then he walks away. And I watch his perfect ass the entire way, thinking about what his weight felt like pressing down on me last night before I got that call. And how much I want to feel that again.

Chapter Twelve

HUNTER

"HUNT, ARE YOU IN OR OUT, MAN?" GABE'S BEST MAN, RHYS, LOOKS AT me with a knowing smile. He lives in New York, and we cross paths occasionally. He knows I'm not paying any fucking attention. We're both sitting at one of the tables dotting the event room Rhys organized for tonight. My back is to the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the Gulf of Mexico.

I'm having a hard time concentrating on the cards in my hand. And it's not the million-dollar view of the ocean distracting me, or the guys trying to torture Gabe about his last days as a bachelor, even though my brother couldn't give two shits about any of it. Hell, he'd have married Avery months ago if it were up to him.

Instead, my mind keeps going back to the woman I left sitting on the balcony. The sun setting on the soft lines of her body, draping her in a golden glow. My mouth waters at the thought of her warm skin, and my cock hardens when I remember her tart taste on my tongue.

Mom asked me earlier what I intended to do with Skylar and when she could expect grandbabies. The answer was simple. But I didn't give it to her.

No, Skye deserves to hear that before my mom does. But I did promise her we'd visit more often. Because there will be a real *we* between Skye and me.

I sip my scotch, then announce, "I'm out." Once I throw my cards down, I push back from the table, then make my way across the room where one of the beautiful waitresses is eyeing my client Miles like a toy she wants to play with. He shuts her down but, as always, is the polite southern boy.

"Pretty sure she was hoping you'd order off the menu," I joke as I move next to him, my tumbler held loosely in one hand.

"Not tonight," he answers, taking a sip of his drink and flashing me a smile. Then he glances at my empty hand. "Give your phone the night off?" He and Skye would definitely get along.

I flip him off and finish my drink before setting it on the empty tray of a passing server. "I do take breaks, you know," I mumble, not sure whether I'm trying to convince him or me.

"Sure you do." He eyes me skeptically.

I tip my head toward him. "I'm taking one right now. See ya later, Hensley."

I'm not sure what I expected to find when I stepped into the room that night, but it certainly wasn't Skye sitting on the couch with her laptop resting on her knees and a smile on her face as she FaceTimes with someone. Not this late.

Her eyes raise to meet mine as I walk in before going back to whoever she's talking to. "Listen Danny, I've got to go. But I'll check in with you again tomorrow, okay? You're a rockstar, kid. Those drumsticks will be back in your hands before you know it. Just listen to Dr. DiMarino and your nurses. I'll see you in a few days."

A voice that falls somewhere between the deep voice of a man and the lighter voice of a young boy answers her, "Thanks, doc. Have fun and don't forget your sunscreen tomorrow." His laughter cuts off, and then, Skye closes her laptop.

"Hey." Her smile is soft and relaxed. Her strawberry-blonde curls hang loosely around the shoulders of her green long-sleeved t-shirt. And her short cotton shorts barely reach the very tops of her long legs. Fuck me, she's gorgeous.

I sit down next to her and stretch my arm out along the back of the couch. "Was that the Danny from last night?"

She nods. "Nobody was expecting him to be doing this well less than twenty-four hours later, but the body is a miraculous thing." Her golden-brown eyes glisten with unshed tears. "Did you have fun?"

"I was a little preoccupied." My fingers tangle in her hair. "There was somewhere else I wanted to be."

Skye throws one leg across my lap, then straddles me. "Oh yeah? And where was that?" Her slim fingers begin unbuttoning my shirt. "Wait. Before you answer that, do you want to know what I did while you were gone?" She lifts her ass up just enough that I miss the weight of her before she slips back down against me and brushes her lips over mine. "I spent my night thinking about you." She pushes my shirt off my shoulders. "I thought about all the things I wished you'd gotten the chance to do to me last night." She lifts again, this time licking my lips, then tugging my bottom lip between hers. "All the things I wished I'd had the chance to do to you."

Her legs slide off the couch as she kneels between my legs and unbuckles my belt. "And do you want to know what I was thinking about when I finally touched myself?"

Unable to speak, I nod my head. I'm completely lost in the trance this woman has woven around me.

"I finally, finally gave in and touched myself when I thought about how badly I wanted your dick in my mouth, Hunt." She pulls at my pants until I lift my hips so she can pull them and my black boxer briefs off my legs. "I rubbed my clit." She takes my dick in her small hands, her slim fingers circling it but not able to wrap all the way around me. "I dipped my fingers in my pussy." She licks a long line from the base of my cock to the aching head, and I groan. "I wished I had my vibrator here with me. Because nothing worked. Nothing satisfied me because I only wanted you." And then she swallows me down into the back of her throat, and I lose control.

I wrap my hands around her head and guide her beautiful mouth up and down my cock as she hums around me. One of her hands pumps me while the other slips inside her shorts.

"Come here, Skye."

She looks up at me with need, her dark eyelashes framing those golden eyes, but doesn't stop until I pull away.

"Your mouth feels like heaven. But I don't want to come in your mouth. Not until you come first." I stand up, throwing my pouty beauty over my shoulder and smacking her ass. "Now let me give you that orgasm you couldn't reach earlier."

Chapter Thirteen

SKYLAR

HUNTER DROPS ME ON THE BED WITH A BOUNCE, AND I CAN'T RIP MY clothes from my body fast enough for him. He tears my shorts off me as I throw my shirt across the room. And when his knee hits the bed, I push him back against the headboard, then turn and bend over to finish the job I started.

With my ass in the air, pointed directly at Hunt's face, I take him into the back of my throat and feel hands running up the inside of my legs before his tongue lashes my clit from behind, sending shock waves through me. I've never tried this before, getting and giving at the same time.

And after a minute, I know why. Ho-ly hell. How am I supposed to concentrate when he's doing *that*? After another minute, I give up and pull away from him.

"Condom," I pant.

The color drains from Hunter's face. "I didn't bring any."

"What?" I startle. "How do you not have any condoms? You were gone all day today. Couldn't you have picked up a box?"

"I was with my mom. I wasn't really thinking about it."

I jump out of bed and quickly grab a string of them from my suitcase and throw them on the bed.

"Who did you plan on using these with?" Hunter growls, his eyebrow arching in question.

I push him back down as I tear one of the foil packets open with my teeth.

"You, you big idiot. I'm not on the pill, and I'm not ready for kids. But I've been waiting for you to notice me since I was eighteen

years old." I don't care that I'm yelling at him. Or that he's smiling at me. I straddle him and sink down, taking his hard cock deep into my body until we both moan with ecstasy.

Hunter's hands grip my hips and hold me in place as he jackknifes up into a more intimate position. Inches separate us as he wraps his arms tightly around me. "I've seen you, Skylar. I've wanted you for years. And now that I have you, I'm never letting you go." He thrusts up inside me as I grind down on him, need and want coiling tight in my belly and my pussy pulsing around him. "I've loved you for years." He thrusts again before flipping us both, so I'm on my back. "But we've both had things we needed to do before we could be together."

His words make me heady.

"You think we can be done with the friend zone now?" Hunter holds himself painfully still, waiting for my answer.

My nails rake down his skin, tracing each indent of his muscular chest before sliding around his back and stopping on his spectacular ass. "I was over the friend zone years ago." My legs wrap around him. "Now move."

Those words unleash a frenzy in Hunter as he fucks me like a beast, taking me fully.

I know I'll never be the same. The first orgasm rips through me like a violent storm. But Hunt doesn't stop. My toes curl, and every nerve goes into sensory overload as he fucks me harder, faster. Chasing his own orgasm. He lifts my legs and hooks them over his arms, changing his angle. And my god . . . bursts of light explode behind my eyes. Hunt brings his mouth down to my breast, sucking before he bites down on my nipple and tugs, and I moan louder, not able to take any more. "Hunt . . ." I grab his face in my hands, and his lips crash over mine, our tongues tangling in rhythm with our bodies. Breathing into each other.

Every snap of our hips.

Every beat of our hearts in sync.

I score his back with my nails and dig in deep as a second orgasm vibrates through my body.

Hunter follows me over the cliff on a violent roar, then collapses with me in his arms.

Spent and boneless. And completely his.

Chapter Fourteen

HUNTER

SKYE AND I SPENT MOST OF THE REST OF THE WEEK IN BED, MAKING UP for all the years we wasted. Well, we also spent it in the shower. Once in the ocean. And another time hidden in a shadowed alcove of the hotel.

I skipped out on golf with the groomsmen on Wednesday, and we had to force ourselves to come up for air for the rehearsal and rehearsal dinner Saturday night. Since the entire bridal party was already here, everything went smoothly, and Skye and I snuck out sometime around ten, heading for the beach.

At least, I think everything went smoothly. I was preoccupied by the woman next to me. "Walk on the beach with me?"

Her golden eyes smile up at me. "Sure." She slips her sandals off, and her long pink dress gets caught in the salt breeze.

We stroll along the edge of the Gulf, what's left of the waves lapping at our feet. The giant silver moon lights up the night sky. But none of it is as beautiful as she is. After a few minutes, I wrap my arms around her and look down into her eyes. "I love you, Skye. I think I always have. We took a winding road to get here, but I'm so glad we finally did."

She reaches up on her toes and brushes her lips over mine. "I love you too, Hunter. I love your big heart and your kind soul. You've always made me feel special and cared for, even when we were just friends. But I'm even more happy we found our way to each other."

"Marry me." I pull the ring box out of my pocket and crack it open in front of her.

Skye gasps. "Hunter . . ." Tears fill her beautiful eyes. "Really?" I'd be worried if she wasn't smiling. "You know I work awful hours. And I want kids, but not yet. I need a few more years to establish myself first."

I take her hand in mine and slide a rose-gold ring with a beautiful pink diamond on her finger. "I love you, Skye. I love all of you. And I know you. I know you've worked hard for your career, and I'd never ask you to give that up. Mine won't always be easy to manage either. But I want to be beside you while we figure it out together."

"Yes." She nods her head and throws her arms around me. "I'll marry you."

When we lie in bed that night, sated and limp, Skye traces circles on my chest, her ring catching the moonlight. "How did you get a ring? When did you plan this?"

I lift her hand to my face and kiss her knuckles. "It may have caught my eye in a jewelry store window when I was shopping with my mom." I roll my eyes, thinking about how excited Mom was when she realized what I was doing.

"Are we ever going to tell them we started out as a lie?" She lifts her mouth to mine, and I drink in her lips.

"We were never a lie, doc. We just took a winding road to get here." I roll her to her back and nudge myself between her legs. "But now that we're here, I'm never letting you go."

The ceremony the next day is on the beach. And while Avery is a gorgeous bride, she doesn't hold a candle to the woman sitting next to my parents. My dad has his arm around my mom, who's holding Skylar's hand like it's a lifeline. I'm pretty sure Mom hasn't stopped crying all day.

She's cried for her baby boy who's getting married.

She's cried for me because I, and I quote, *finally pulled my head out of my ass and saw what's been in front of me for years.*

She cried because she's so happy she's going to finally have daughters.

Skylar handed her an embroidered handkerchief and held her hand the whole time. Now, as my brother and his bride say their vows, my eyes lock with Skye's, and I know we're right where we're supposed to be. All those years of friendship gave us this strong foundation, which I know will be the basis for an amazing life.

Later, my hand dances down the bare skin of Skye's back as we dance under the moonlight to a reggae version of "Over The Rainbow." Her copper-colored dress ties in a long ribbon around her neck, and I fucking love how much satisfaction I'll get when I untie her clothes later tonight.

She rests her head on my shoulder and hums along with the song.

"Is this the kind of wedding you want, doc?"

"No," she answers quietly. "Gabe and Avery had to people all week. I people enough at work. I don't want to have to do it for an entire week leading up to my wedding."

I chuckle at her honest answer. "Okay. No peopling. So what do you want?"

"Hmm. You, me, and our families. Nothing big. I like the whole outside vibe." She lifts her head and kisses my jaw. "What do *you* want?"

"You." I take her lips again. "Just you."

A beautiful smile tips at her lips. "Great answer, Hunt." Her arms tighten around me. "You've got me. Forever."

"Forever."

Bella Matthews Books and Bio

Bella Matthews is a Jersey girl at heart. She is married to her very own Alpha Male and raising three little ones. You can typically find her running from one sporting event to another. When she is home, she is usually hiding in her home office with the only other female in her house, her rescue dog Tinker Bell by her side. She likes to write swoon-worthy heroes and sassy, smart heroines with a healthy dose of laughter thrown in.

[Check out my books here!](#)

Lottie & Luke

FRANKIE LOVE

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Chapter One

LOTTIE

I'M A SMALL-TOWN GIRL FROM TENNESSEE AND I'VE NEVER LEFT THE state, but landing here in Florida with the sun shining, the sky bright blue, and palm trees dotting the landscape, I feel my heart practically bursting with excitement.

It's not just the vacation I need, but I am getting the chance to see my oldest friend Avery tie the knot. It seems like just yesterday we were at her Uncle Luke's ranch riding horses as kids, but now she's fallen in love. Taking more than a leap of faith. She's making a commitment forever.

I'm lost in this daydream, staring out the window, when the shuttle bus driver tells me we've made it to the hotel. Blushing, I thank him for the ride and he smiles, telling me the pleasure's all his. Thanks to the friendly vibes I've received since landing in Florida, my insecurity about coming to this fancy destination wedding has eased up a bit. I grab the suitcase that used to be my grandma's and carry it into the hotel lobby. When I check in at the front desk, I swallow anxiously.

"I'm Lottie Adams," I tell the woman behind a computer, her nails click-clacking over the keyboard. "I'm checking in."

"Oh, I see you've made a reservation in one of our economy rooms."

"Yes," I say, tucking a strand of my blonde hair behind my ear. "I'm here for Avery and Gabe's wedding."

"Of course," she says. "Well, it actually looks like the wedding party has upgraded you."

"Really?" I say. "Well, that's nice."

The woman smiles, handing me a key card. "It's on the fourth floor. Enjoy your time and there's complimentary beverages in the afternoons out on the beach for hotel guests."

"Wow," I say, "I'll make sure to find that bar."

She smiles, "Have a great day."

In the elevator I text Avery. *You upgraded my room? Girl, you're too kind.*

Avery sends me back a kissy face emoji. *Of course, it's our pleasure! Can't wait to see you tonight for the bachelorette party. We're getting ready in my penthouse suite. Come when you can!*

I get into my hotel room and pull open the blinds to take in the beautiful beachfront view.

Wow. I've never seen white sand beaches like this, except in a postcard, but this is the real deal. I run my fingers over the locket that hangs around my neck, thinking of Grandma. She would have loved to see this beach. Life never granted her much opportunity to leave our small town but I know she would've loved it. It's hard to not think of her. I lost her just a year ago, but I remember what she told me before she passed. "It's time you found someone to care for you for a while. You've spent your entire life caring for me."

Those words feel lodged in my throat as I unpack my suitcase, looking for the black dress I brought for the bachelorette party tonight, one I had to buy just for this occasion because I had nothing dressy in my closet.

I'm not one for dancing and clubbing. Not because I don't like to have a good time, but I'm more of a homebody. I prefer to spend my evenings in the kitchen having a mug of tea instead of a cocktail. But I want to have only positive vibes for tonight. It's Avery's night after all, not mine.

Getting ready in the hotel suite is awesome. All the bridesmaids are here and everyone is so excited about the wedding. Emma has arrived – she's another girl we grew up with in town and I haven't seen her for a while. She lives in New York City now and is a wedding planner. There's also Brie, who lives in Miami with Avery. They were college roommates, are best friends, and current coworkers. I would be lying if I told you I didn't feel slightly insecure next to these women who are so successful, so well put together. Ruby made it as well – she also lives in New York. Sadie, Riley, and Vivian are here as well.

"So, let's get this party started," Avery says. Emma pours the champagne and we put on our party dresses. Everyone's doing makeup and I'm trying to remember how to put on eyeliner when Avery offers to give me a hand.

"How was the flight?" she asks.

"Considering it was my first flight in my life," I say with a laugh, "I'd say it was pretty good. I got free pretzels."

"Well la-ti-da," Avery says, shaking her hips.

"Who's going to be here from your family?" I ask her. "Is everyone flying in?"

"My grandparents can't. My grandpa had hip replacement surgery recently, but my aunt is here. Oh, and my uncle Luke, he's here."

"Really?" I say. "Uncle Luke?"

Avery nods. "Yeah. I don't think that man has left his cabin in the mountains for years. Probably not since we saw him last at my high school graduation party. But he is here, which is pretty sweet."

"Yeah," I say, remembering him all too well, "that is sweet."

When she walks away, I let out a sigh. Her uncle Luke is probably the first man I ever had a crush on. He's certainly the first man I ever imagined myself *with*, which is all kinds of mortifying to admit even to myself.

I can't think about that because everybody is doing shots for this bachelorette party. I throw one back myself before we grab our purses to leave. I bite my bottom lip thinking how great it would be to run into Luke, especially wearing a tiny little black dress like this.

Chapter Two

LUKE

THIS FANCY ASS HOTEL IS WAY OUT OF MY COMFORT ZONE BUT BEING here for Avery's big day is all that matters. Hell, catching a plane and flying south to Florida is not how I typically spend my weekends. I'd rather be out hunting in the back forty or chopping logs for the winter, but here I am. White sand beaches, palm trees, and sunshine. I suppose it might do me good every once in a while to come out of my man-cave.

But once I looked in the mirror of my hotel room this morning, I realized I could probably use a bit of a trim and a cut. So I head down to the spa and salon in the hotel. Figuring I need to look decent for Avery's family photos after the wedding, I decide to do my small part in looking more like an uncle and less like a wild mountain man.

When I pull open the door to the salon, I see Avery's oldest friend Lottie standing there. Damn. I haven't seen that woman since she was 18 years old at Avery's high school graduation. I'd come back to Tennessee for the ceremony, but I couldn't stay in town for long. I didn't trust myself around that girl, Lottie. Hell, she was a pure woman. She was everything.

"Uncle Luke," Avery says. She's with the rest of her bridal party and the girls turn, smiling when they see me. Avery gives me a big hug.

"Hey sweetheart. I wasn't thinking I'd see you this morning."

"Are you crashing our spa day?" Avery asks with a grin.

I laugh. "I'll pass on that, but I figured I might as well get a bit of a haircut for your wedding."

She beams up at me. "Thank you," she says. "I know you probably prefer letting yourself turn into a half-bear but..."

I shake my head. "No, no, no. It's your wedding and I want to look decent when I put on that suit and tie in a few days."

She smiles. "Oh, Lottie's here. Do you remember her? We used to ride horses at your ranch. I mean, we were probably only 10 years old then. It was right before you left and moved to Idaho." Avery reaches for Lottie's hand and pulls her over.

Lottie though, lowers her chin, lifts her eyes to me, and fuck, right then and there I'm hooked again. She hasn't changed. She still carries this pure-hearted innocence. Her long blonde hair hangs to her waist. Her eyelashes thick and full. Her pink plump lips tempting me.

"Hey," she says, "it's good to see you again." She stumbles over her words though and quickly excuses herself.

Avery smiles. "Well, I think it's time to go get our facials, but I'll see you around, Uncle Luke."

I give them a quick nod before heading to a haircut station where the stylist begins to give me a cut and shave.

The whole time I'm thinking about Lottie, wondering if she's stripped down to nothing and put a fluffy robe on for her spa treatments. It's wrong, I figure, thinking of her like that, but damn, she is all grown up and if I find myself next to her again, I don't think I'll be so polite.

I don't think I could hold back how I truly feel.

The next morning I decide I probably could use some sunshine. Purchasing some swim trunks and flip-flops in the hotel lobby, I head down to the pool with a book.

The moment I enter the patio surrounding the pool, I see Lottie. She's lying back on a pool chair, a book in her hands, sunglasses shielding her eyes. She's wearing a pink two-piece suit that leaves little to the imagination. Damn, her tits look good.

I sit down in the empty chair next to her and ask what she's drinking. She laughs, lowering the book. "Hey Luke," she says. "You just hanging out at the pool today?"

I nod. "Yeah, the wedding's not for a few days. I figured I might as well take it easy if I was flying all the way down here."

The waitress comes by and I ask Lottie what she'd like to drink. "Oh, I'm just drinking water," she laughs. "I have to save my money for rent."

I remember how she was always struggling with cash growing up. She and her grandma lived on their own on her grandmother's pension.

I ask the waitress if she can get us both piña coladas and when she walks away, Lottie laughs. "I can't picture you drinking a fruity drink. You were always so rough-and-tumble. Maybe a dark and stormy is a better drink for you."

I chuckle. "In that case, what should you be drinking? Cosmopolitan or old fashioned?"

Lottie laughs at this, leaning on her side, propping her head up on her elbow, making her curves even more accentuated. "I'd be more of an old fashioned than a cosmopolitan. That's for sure. I'm not like Avery and her friends living in New York, the high-end lifestyle. I've still never left Tennessee."

When the drinks arrive, we make a toast. "Well, you've left now," I say. "Here we are in paradise."

Lottie smiles. "I'm suddenly feeling very happy I came."

Chapter Three

LOTTIE

LUKE IS TWICE MY AGE, BUT SITTING HERE WITH HIM IN THESE POOL chairs, side by side, I feel more than a spark. There is chemistry between us, and if I'm being honest, there always has been.

"Did you have fun at the spa yesterday?"

I groan. "Honestly, I just used the soaking tub because I couldn't really afford the fancy services. I know Avery had a great time though. It's just not really something I've ever done before, and oh my goodness, a facial was like a hundred dollars."

Luke nods. "Well, I hope the soaking tub was fun. What do you think of my haircut?" It's short on the sides but a little longer up top, and he somehow looks even more attractive.

I smile. "I think it looks really good. They cleaned you up pretty nice around the ears."

I reach out and touch his sideburns, immediately withdrawing my hand, feeling like I just crossed a line, but he doesn't seem to mind.

His eyes meet mine and I know he was looking me up and down in my teeny, tiny bikini that leaves little to the imagination.

To be honest, I'm wearing it for a reason. I was hoping to find him today.

This is better than I could have imagined though.

"So, what have you been up to all these years?" he asks.

"My life hasn't been as glamorous as Avery's," I admit. "After my grandma died last year, I've been living paycheck to paycheck, kind of, just trying to keep the apartment. I really want to go to school to be a pastry chef. I'm actually making the cake for Avery and Gabe's

wedding, but it's just a hobby. Maybe one day I could go to school and get my certificate, but until then I'm working as a receptionist at an eyeglass store. Random, I know, but it's a job. Sorry," I say, realizing I'm rambling. "I'm talking too much. What about you? What have you been up to?"

"Well, I've lived in the woods for a long time, out in Idaho. I think you'd like it, it reminds me of Tennessee, long stretches of land, big trees. It's beautiful, but to be honest, I get a little lonely. I've been thinking of buying a place back in our hometown. My parents are getting older and need more help. I want to be around for what matters, you know?"

I smile. "Good for you. I wouldn't trade anything for the time I spent with my grandma before she passed."

"Have you always had such a big heart?" Luke asks me.

Feeling embarrassed, I simply smile. "You're making me blush, Luke, but that's nothing new. You always made me feel so good, just being around you." I laugh, remembering.

"You're talking about Avery's graduation party?"

I giggle. "Yeah. I fell down the stairs like an idiot and you got me an ice pack, got me into a chair, propped up my leg, made sure I was okay. I always remember that, how you made me feel seen."

Luke's eyes are staring straight at me. "That's because I did see you, always have."

We're leaning toward one another and if I could jump into his pool chair, I would.

God, I want to kiss him, but out of the corner of my eye, I see my oldest friend, Avery, walking toward us with a tote bag on her arm and a bathing suit cover-up on.

"Hey, guys," Avery says, waving.

I smile tightly, laughing off the near intimate moment I was going to share with Avery's uncle, feeling all sorts of hot and bothered.

I can feel his eyes on me as Avery sits down on my pool chair, asking what I'm reading. I lick my lips, focusing on my friend, trying not to imagine if that near kiss had happened.

Chapter Four

LUKE

I HAVE TO LEAVE LOTTIE AT THE POOL. I CAN'T SIT OUT HERE WITHOUT imagining being in bed with her. She looks disappointed when I tell her I'm headed out, but Avery doesn't notice and instead begins discussing plans for lunch.

Me, I head right up to my hotel suite and take a cold ass shower. It's all I can do to calm my raging cock.

Damn, I want her bad.

After my shower I get dressed, and I might sound like a stalker, but I walk around the property, hoping I might find her again, see her, get the chance to talk to her, but it doesn't pay off.

I don't see her for the rest of the day, and when I go to bed that night, my dreams are filled with visions of Lottie, her bright smile, her honesty, the way she wears her heart on her sleeve, without pity, without asking for anything. She tells it like it is. Now that is a woman I admire.

The next day, I head down to the hotel restaurant for breakfast, and that's when I see her again. She's wearing leggings and a t-shirt and a pair of running shoes. "You going out for a jog?" I ask her.

She shakes her head. "No, I just need to be comfy. I'm going to the kitchen right now to make the wedding cake. I'm so excited about it. I'm making red velvet, Avery's favorite."

Once again, I'm impressed by the way she's thinking about what other people want. It's her vacation and here she is going to the kitchen to bake a cake.

"Do you have plans later today?" I ask her. "I thought maybe we could go back to that spa. I could book a few services for you. It

seems like you never get a chance to relax and you might need that after working in a hot kitchen all day."

Lottie looks at me, stunned. "Really? You want to do that with me?"

I run a hand over my beard. "Maybe I read the situation wrong, I thought--"

"No," she says, shaking her head. "You didn't read anything wrong. I think it sounds perfect. There's nothing I'd like to do more."

Her honest and genuine smile eases the momentary anxiousness I felt when I thought I'd overstepped. "How about 4:00?" I say. "Will you be done with the cake by then?"

"That's perfect," she says. "I'll see you then. Do you want to meet there?"

I nod. "It's a date."

For the rest of the day, I swear to fucking God, I'm on cloud nine. When I get up to the spa, I'm thankful there are no other bridesmaids around the corner, no groomsmen poking their heads into my business. It's just her and me.

"Hey," she says. "I actually thought maybe I had imagined the entire encounter this morning, you inviting me here, but..."

I shake my head. "No," I say. "You didn't imagine anything. This is very real."

I press a hand to the base of her back, leading her into the spa. A spa attendant shows us to the back room. "You can change in here, and then if you'll each lie face down on your massage tables, the masseuse will be in shortly."

Lottie looks at me. "A couple's massage?"

"Is that okay?" I ask.

She sighs, her shoulders relaxing. "That sounds incredible. Thank you for ..." She shakes her head, looking over the room. "For this."

I realize then that Lottie needs a lot more care – a lot more tender loving care – and I think I might be the man to give it to her.

We may be face down on our massage tables, but I feel an electric spark between us. I wish it was me giving her the massage, but I suppose I need to take this one step at a time. Step one, make sure Lottie's relaxed, with a clear head, so whatever choice she makes next, it's one she wants.

The 90 minutes disappear. I swear to God, I floated away, but when the masseuses ask if we would like to go to our mud bath now,

Lottie sits up with the sheet around her. Her skin glistens from the massage oil, her hair tangled around her face, and she beams over at me.

"A mud bath?"

The masseuse nods. "Yes, a lot of people enjoy them after their relaxation massage. The mud is full of properties that will exfoliate your skin and make you feel even better. There's warm showers in the bathroom for you as well. It's a private space."

"That sounds great," Lottie says, and the masseuse leads us to the mud bath room.

Once inside, she explains that we need to undress fully to enter the bath, and points to where the showers are. "You've booked the room for two hours, so no worries, take as long as you'd like. The door locks for privacy."

The masseuse leaves and suddenly I'm standing alone with Lottie. We're in spa bath robes, but neither of us is wearing anything else. My cock, it fucking grows just thinking about her setting that robe of hers aside.

She licks her lips slowly, looking at me. "I've never been in a mud bath before."

"Neither have I," I admit. "Is it too weird?"

She shakes her head. "No, it seems good for... our skin?" Then she laughs, pressing her hands to her face. "I'm sorry, I want this, but it feels like a big leap going from this to that."

"With me?" I ask.

She nods. "Yeah, you're going to see me completely naked and we've never even..."

I step toward her. "Never even kissed?"

She sighs as I press a hand to her cheek, drawing her close.

"Exactly," she whispers.

My lips are on hers then, and I kiss her, gently. Her mouth opens and her tongue finds mine, and fuck, I'm lost in her forever.

She's petite in my arms and I wrap mine around her, holding her tight as I explore her mouth, wanting to enjoy every second that she offers. When the kiss ends and she steps back, she laughs.

"What?" I say.

"We didn't lock the door." She steps over and locks it, then unties the belt on her robe, letting it fall to the floor.

"Fuck," I groan. "You're beautiful."

"Yeah?" she asks, looking down at herself, her tits big and full, her nipples hard, her waist narrow, her hips wide, and fuck, she has the prettiest patch of hair between her legs, fluffy and soft, and I want to breathe it in, inhale her completely.

I take my robe off as well, and her eyes go wide as she takes in my length.

"I suppose you have plenty of time to work out in the woods. I don't even think that's a six-pack, Luke. I am counting eight."

I chuckle, reaching for her hand. "Why don't we get in the bath and see how we like it? If it's too weird, we can always leave."

She nods, holding my hand tight as we step into the bath, the mud is thick and lush around us as we sink in, up to our chests.

Her tits are hidden, which is a bit of a disappointment, but being in here with her feels luxurious. We sit side by side, even though the tub is large, like a hot tub. I turn toward her, our shoulders touching.

"That kiss," I tell her, "that was something else."

"Yeah," she says. "It was."

And then, to my surprise, she lifts her leg and sits down on my lap. I wrap my arms around her waist, loving the way it feels to have her pressed against me.

"Fuck," I say, "I wasn't thinking it would go like this."

"No?" she asks. Her eyebrows lift. "I was hoping it would."

She leans in then, kissing me again, and fuck, I swear I've died and gone to heaven.

Chapter Five

LOTTIE

AFTER THE 90-MINUTE MASSAGE, MY BODY FELT LIKE JELLY IN THE MOST delicious way. When we were whisked into this mud room, I felt like I could die a happy woman. But Luke kissing me took me to the next level. He is strong, capable and the way he holds me in his arms makes me feel like a treasure.

As we kiss, the mud makes things messy; it's on our faces, in our hair. We're already completely covered in it, but it's impossible not to laugh.

"I don't think I've ever been such a mess in my life. I wonder what you're even thinking looking at me right now with mud all over my face and in my hair."

Luke stops. He kisses me again. "I think you look beautiful just as you are."

"Do you realize how smooth you seem?"

He laughs. "Funny considering I live alone and haven't been out in a hell of a long time."

"So you don't date when you're out there in Idaho?" I lift my brows, wondering if I'm asking for more than I should.

He clears his throat. "I haven't been with anyone since..."

"Since what?" I ask.

"Since I knew. Well, since that day at Avery's graduation, I saw you then and I knew. Hell, I dreamed one day you'd be mine." His eyes don't lie.

Beaming, I tell him my truth, "I have saved myself all these years for you."

He growls then. "You mean it?"

I nod. "Yeah. I'm probably the oldest virgin in the world. 25 years old and never had sex."

"Not once?" he asks again.

I shake my head. "Not once. Maybe I've been living in a fantasy, but the fantasy was pretty good."

"You're telling me you've imagined yourself with me?"

"I *only* imagine myself with you," I tell him plainly, giving him the deepest truth I have. The secret I never thought I'd confess.

He takes me by the hand and leads me out of the tub, the mud splattering on the cool tile floor, and he turns on the double-headed shower. "Nice and warm. Let's get you cleaned up, Lottie, so we can leave."

"You want the date to end?" I ask as I step under the shower head.

He chuckles, "Oh baby. I think it's just beginning."

Once we're dressed, we head up to his hotel suite. There is a growing need in my belly, between my legs, at my very core. We've talked about the fact we've wanted one another for years, that I'm a virgin, that I've saved myself for him, and now in the elevator alone he asks, "Are you sure you want this?"

I nod. "Yes, I'm sure."

I feel like I'm in a fairy tale right now and I definitely do not want to wake up from this dream. He looks at me with a tenderness that sets my heart on fire and he takes my hand, keying open the door to his hotel suite.

Once we're inside, I walk around his room, running my fingers over the bedspread, looking out the window. The sun has set and below there are people at outdoor restaurants, dining with twinkling lights hanging in the air.

He comes up behind me then, wrapping his arms around my waist. He kisses my neck. "I know the view is incredible, but I'd rather look in your eyes."

We undress quickly then. We're both consenting adults with one thing on our mind, pleasing one another to no end.

Standing before him naked feels incredible. The way he looks at me with a deep growl in his belly, a need on his face... It's plainly written what he desires, *me*.

It sends the most intoxicating thrill through my body as he steps closer, wrapping me in his arms once more.

"Fuck, this is where you belong."

I'm not nervous and I'm not scared. I want him so, so bad. I feel his thick cock against me as he kisses me slowly. It's pressed against my belly, throbbing, hard and eager. I close my eyes, giving into the sensation of his hands exploring my breasts, teasing my nipples, squeezing my ass. Guiding me to his big king-size bed, setting me right in the center.

"You look beautiful like this," he tells me. "Your hair splayed out around you. Your eyes wide with excitement, your body piqued."

"I want you so bad," I tell him, taking his hand and guiding him to my center.

He shakes his head. "Oh baby, first I want to taste you. I want to lick you so fucking bad." He runs his hand over my mound and for a moment I wonder if I should have shaved my pussy bare, but he pats the curly hair, grinning.

"What?" I say.

"I just like you like this," he says. "Fresh, clean and so fucking innocent."

I exhale then. All my worries about how I look and how he might like me fade away as he pulls my ass to the end of the bed and then kneels on the floor.

"I'm going to need you to relax."

"I don't think I could be any more relaxed," I tell him with a tiny laugh.

"Good," he says, "I guess we'll need many more massages in our future."

"Yeah," I say, "but maybe you can learn to be the masseuse because I swear to God the whole time I was lying a few feet away from you, all I wanted was for you to run your hands all over me."

"Fuck," he says.

I prop myself up on my elbows. "What?"

He chuckles. "I was thinking the same fucking thing. I wanted those masseuses to leave so I could be alone with you in that room."

"Oh yeah?" I say. "And what would you have done, Luke?"

"I would've done this."

And then he begins to ease my knees apart, press his tongue to my core, licking my folds up and down. Opening me up, tasting me, sucking my clit, making me squirm.

I giggle. "Oh God," I say, "I thought I was relaxed, but now I feel a little tense, a little..."

"It's because you've never had a proper orgasm, Lottie," he says gently. "It's because your body hasn't had *me* before."

"I've tried to get off," I admit to him. "I even got a vibrator. I bought a stupid dildo, just..."

He smiles. "Baby," he says, "you needed a real man. You needed me." He begins to finger me then. One finger, then another, flicking deep inside me against my G-spot, making me press my knuckles to my mouth and bite down.

"Oh God," I moan as he begins to explore my opening with an eagerness I could have never achieved on my own. No speed on a vibrator would have done what he's doing now. Opening me up, stretching me, adding a third finger and, "Oh my God, yes," I moan, my whole body tensing, my core tight around his fingers. I'm juicy. I'm wet. I'm...

"Oh God," I say. "What's happening?"

"You're squirting, baby." He grins. "You're a squirter."

"Is that bad?" I say, feeling like he probably thinks I've got no idea what's happening to my body, but I don't. I'm new to this. I'm totally inexperienced and he... Oh God, he is making me feel incredible.

"Squirting is a good thing," he says. "You're coming hard, baby. Just keep letting it go. Letting it go until..."

"Oh God," I cry out, my hands clenching around the bedspread. My whole body is on fire, tight, tight, tight, and then I go exactly where he tells me to.

I'm completely undone as he sucks my cunt, his fingers squeezing my thighs, his lips back on my pussy, sucking and licking as if he can't get enough. My whole body is vibrating with pleasure.

"Okay," he says, "that's enough, baby."

He lifts me up, easing me further back on the bed so my head can rest against the pillows once more.

He lies next to me, pulling me to him. "You're all wet," I say, my hand on his chest.

"That's your juice," he says. "Your release."

"Oh wow," I say, "that was a lot."

"There's no such thing as too much," he says.

Chapter Six

LUKE

LICKING LOTTIE UNTIL SHE WAS DRIPPING ALL OVER ME WAS THE HOTTEST fucking thing I've ever experienced in my life.

I run my hands over the curve of her hip and draw her closer.

"I need you," I tell her. "I need you *now*."

She nods ever so slowly as I roll on top of her, my cock between her legs, her narrow frame between my arms. I kiss her deeply, hard and with intention. She gasps as my tongue twirls around her, my cock hard and throbbing.

"Your pussy is nice and ready," I tell her. "It's time for you to take me, baby. Are you ready?"

She nods. "I'm so ready for you, Luke," she says. "Fill me up. I want to feel you inside of me. I've been dreaming about it for so long and now, now..." She shakes her head and her eyes close as I begin to enter her tight cunt.

Fuck. Her innocence is obvious. Her legs wrap around me with an innate understanding of where she belongs, tight against me.

I fill her up and she gasps. "Oh God," she says. "You're too big!"

"I know, baby. It'll hurt and then it will feel so damn good."

She nods, believing me, and I realize the words I tell her aren't just rolling off her. She's taking them in. She trusts me with all of herself and that level of power is intoxicating, but I will wield it with care. I will guide this girl exactly where she belongs.

I fill her up, her tightness around my cock that of a goddamn dream.

"Oh God," she moans.

As I kiss her neck, I palm her ripe tits and I begin to move against her, my cock fully entered, her pussy so nice and tight, her slick entrance lubricating every thrust as I begin to make her mine.

"Oh God," she whispers in my ear.

I growl against her. "I fucking love you," I say.

She looks into my eyes as I take her to the edge, a place she's never been before. "Love?" she says.

I nod. "It's not because of this. It's because of *you*. I've known it forever, for years, and now..."

"Now we're here," she finishes for me.

I take her until my cock is going to explode. "I'm not wearing a condom," I tell her. "Do you want me to pull out?"

She shakes her head. "No, I want to feel all of you. I want to feel, oh God," she moans, coming against me. My cock knows exactly where to take her and her orgasm begins to roll over her as I come hard in her sweet, tight cunt.

"Fuck," I groan, filling her up, and she lets out a deep moan of pleasure. As I finish inside her, her legs shake.

"Oh my God," she says, panting.

As I pull out, I roll to her side, but I rest my hand on her pussy, over the dewy hair of her mound, petting her like the kitty cat she is.

She looks over at me, her eyes blinking slowly, her tits rising and falling as she takes each bated breath.

"Please tell me we can do that again."

I chuckle, pulling her up to sit on the bed. She giggles, laughing as I draw her into my lap, my cock right between us. She looks down at it.

"Can I..." She shakes her head as if embarrassed.

"What is it, Lottie? You can ask me anything."

"Can I suck you? I mean, you got to lick me down there and maybe I could..."

"Of course," I tell her. "You can have every fucking inch of me if you'd like."

She smiles at me, kissing me again and wrapping her arms around my neck. "Oh God. I love you, Luke. I love you so much. I didn't think you'd ever see me like I saw you and..."

"Fuck," I tell her, "those words make me so damn hard."

She pulls back, laughing. "Does that mean I get to suck your cock now? Pretty please?"

I grin. "Yeah, baby. You can do whatever you like, but how about we both play?"

"What do you mean?" she asks.

"Like this," I say. I lie down on the bed and I tell her to turn around so her plump and juicy pussy is right in my face. "You're going to sit right here and then you're going to lean down and you're going to start sucking my cock. You're going to stroke me up and down nice and good, and my balls? You're going to lick them too."

"Really?" she asks, looking over her shoulder. "You don't mind me sitting on your face?"

I laugh, squeezing her cheeks with my palms and drawing her pussy closer. God, she smells good.

"No, I don't mind," I say, "but if you don't like sucking me off you stop, okay? You tell me what you like and what you don't and I'll make sure you're happy."

She begins to stroke me up and down just like I asked. My balls tense and my cock gets nice and rigid, hard as hell.

My tongue runs over her slit, entering her. I lick as her pussy lips part, letting me run my tongue up and down her sweet folds. She's so juicy and ripe. She's so ready for more. This cunt of hers was made for me and that mouth of hers, fuck, it was made for my cock.

She begins bobbing her head and sucking me off, making me wild with need, the need to lose my load in her mouth. I want her to swallow my seed. I want it to run down that neck of hers, in her throat to her belly. I want to fill her up nice and good, forever.

She sucks me until I'm about to explode and her pussy is dripping all over my beard. I run my mouth up and down, faster and faster and faster, until she's shrieking with pleasure and delight.

I come hard in her mouth and she doesn't stop pumping my shaft. She's moaning, whimpering against me, and I hold onto her hips, grinding my mouth against her cunt until there's nothing but an orgasm rolling across this entire hotel room.

We finish, both of us dripping with one another, sweaty and hot and needy for more. I've never felt so greedy in my whole fucking life, but this girl, she's mine.

I pin her to the bed, my hands on her wrists.

"Fuck, you're incredible," I tell her.

She grins. "You're not so bad yourself, Luke. *Uncle Luke.*"

I chuckle. "No, I'm not your uncle. *I'm your man.*"

Chapter Seven

LOTTIE

AT THE REHEARSAL DINNER, I CAN'T STOP STARING AT LUKE. Throughout the dinner, our eyes keep meeting and I wish I could sit next to him, wrap my arms around his big bicep and lean in for a kiss.

But I don't want to make Avery's big day about me. I don't want drama, especially not for my oldest friend. So I sit with the other girls in the wedding party and enjoy myself.

Avery laughs when she walks over to our table with a glass of champagne in her hand. "What's so funny?" I ask.

"Oh, I was just talking to my uncle Luke and gosh, he's in a good mood. I guess the sunshine in Florida is good for his soul because he's always been such a grump. But now, it's like a few days in paradise and he's a different man."

I feel my cheeks go red and I take a sip of my wine to avoid speaking. I have an idea that I know exactly why her uncle Luke is in such a good mood.

And sure, the sun and sand help, but I have a feeling it's what we were doing in his bed all night and for most of today that really changed his mood for the better.

After dinner, I thank Avery for everything. "Do you need any help tonight with last minute preparations?"

She shakes her head. "No, I've got it all under control. I've had so many days to just relax and unwind that I'm in a really good place mentally."

"Okay," I say. "You're going to be a beautiful bride tomorrow. You have such a big heart and such a good soul. Gabe is a lucky man to

marry you."

Avery smiles, holding my hands. "And one day, you'll find a guy just as great as Gabe. Maybe even better," she says. "Better because he'll be perfect for you."

"Yeah," I say. "Maybe."

"Not maybe," Avery says. "You never know when the right man will turn up in your life. As long as you keep your heart open to it, he could be just around the corner."

I swallow, walking away. And as I turn around the corner, there he is, *Luke*.

He's waiting for me. I lick my lips as I walk toward him. Then I look over my shoulder, wanting to know if anyone's noticed us pairing off, but no one's paying us any attention. We're alone as we walk toward the elevator.

"So," I say, "what are you thinking?"

He chuckles. "You know exactly what I'm thinking."

"In that case," I say, "are you coming to my room or not?"

Once the hotel room door is closed behind us, Luke pins me against it, kissing me hard, massaging my breasts. My dress is short and stretchy and I'm able to hitch my leg around his hip as he slams against me, his cock grinding at my belly.

"Oh my God," I moan. "I was so horny sitting across that restaurant from you. All I wanted was this."

"Damn," he says, "because I was thinking the same fucking thing. I was sitting there making small talk about sports or some shit and the whole time all I was thinking about was your wet pussy."

I close my eyes, moaning as he rips the dress off of me, literally rips it. The straps break and he shoves it down past my hips. "There you go," he says. "Oh fuck. You weren't wearing any panties all night long?"

I shake my head. "I was being a bad girl, I guess."

"No," he says, "you were being perfect." He carries me to the bed and undresses quickly. "Come here," he says. "I need you to sit right here on my cock."

"Yeah?" I ask, my eyes widening. "We didn't do this position last night."

"No," he says. "But now, I think you're ready."

"Is it going to feel different?" I ask him.

He nods as I sit down, his cock right in front of my cunt. I begin to stroke the thick rod, hard and in charge.

"It'll be a lot more pressure," he says, caressing my breasts. "It'll be a deeper sensation. And I didn't want to overwhelm you with it yesterday."

"I see," I say with a smile. "You were looking out for me."

"Yes, because I love you."

"You mean it?" I ask. "You said it last night and I said it back, but then today I was overthinking things. I wondered if maybe we were caught up in the moment."

He lifts my ass up. "There you go," he says. "You're going to sit right down on it. And no, I wasn't caught up in anything. I was telling you the fucking truth. I want you. I need you. I love you."

I sit down on his length, gasping as I do. "Oh God," I say. "Oh yes," I moan, lowering my ass, opening up for him.

He's big and thick, but this sensation, the way he hits my core so deeply... I groan, mortified at the animal sound coming from me. "I think you're bigger than you were yesterday," I say.

He shakes his head. "No, baby. You got this. Nice and slow." His hands are on my hips. "Just move gently," he says. "Not too much, not all at once."

I move my hips as he says, shimmying like I'm dancing. My hair falls over his chest and he tucks it behind my ear, then draws me closer, kissing me.

I whimper against his mouth and he bites my bottom lip, making me feel beautiful, making me feel like I am his.

"There you go," he says as I begin to moan more loudly. "Now, go as fast as you like."

I do exactly as he tells me and I begin moving my body faster and faster. Now, I'm grinding against him, bouncing up and down, my tits swaying as I feel the enormous stretch of my pussy taking him in the most incredible way. The way my clit pushes against his cock makes the orgasm ride up inside of me, setting my whole soul on fire.

"Oh God," I moan, "you're right. This is incredible."

He kisses me then, holding me tight. "I love you. *I love you.*"

It's the only thing I hear as I come, as he comes, as we come together.

Chapter Eight

LUKE

I KNOW THE WEDDING IS ALL ABOUT AVERY AND GABE, BUT I'M FOCUSED on watching Lottie walk down the aisle. When she does, she takes my breath away. She looks so beautiful in her flowing pink bridesmaid dress.

When she passes me, she smiles. It's unmistakable that she's looking right at me. And then I get the view of her ass in that dress and fuck, I'm a goner.

Her long hair is curled and falls down her back and for the entire ceremony I'm transfixed. She is everything I want and more, and the incredible thing is she wants me to.

At the reception, I'm anxious to talk to her. I have a lot to say.

She stands next to me as Avery and Gabe cut the cake. "It's beautiful," I tell her. "You did such a good job."

She beams. "Thanks, I wanted it to be perfect and I was so nervous this morning, icing it and wanting to make sure everything came together right, but..."

I chuckle, "Lottie, you did good. You're going to be such a good pastry chef one day. I just know it."

She blushes at my words and I ask if we can go talk down on the beach.

She nods, "Sure."

We take our leave and before we reach the beach, we slide off our sandals, our toes in the sand. As we begin to walk away from the music, I boldly take her hand in mine.

I know she hasn't told Avery about us, but soon enough, she's going to have to.

I turn into her then and I cup her cheek with my hand, "I love you. I meant it when I said it and I'll say it again. I love you, Lottie, so damn much."

She smiles. "I love you too, Luke. I feel like I came down here for this wedding and you turned my entire life upside down. I'm just..."

She swallows, blinking back tears.

"What is it, love?"

"It's just, tomorrow this fairytale ends. You are going back home to Idaho and I live in Tennessee and..." She begins to cry. Her shoulders shake and I pull her into my arms, giving her a tight hug.

"Baby, we're not saying goodbye."

"We're not?" she asks, licking her lips as I pull back and kneel on one knee in front of her. From my pocket, I pull out a jewelry box.

"I went into town today," I tell her, "and I bought the biggest diamond I could find."

"Stop," she says, "Luke." She covers her face with her hands, shaking her head.

"Hey," I say, taking her hand and pulling it away. "Let me see your eyes when I ask you to marry me."

"Ask me to marry you? Luke." She trembles, her hands shake.

"Look," I say, "finding you here is my idea of a fairy tale. You're the one I've wanted for so damn long and it turns out you want me too."

"I do," she says. "Oh Luke, I want you so bad."

"Hey, don't get ahead of yourself. I can't exactly make love to you on this beach. We got to hold our horses until we get back to the hotel room."

She laughs as I pull out the ring and slide it onto her finger. It's a perfect fit.

"Oh Luke," she says, "this is too much."

"No," I say, "you deserve so much more. Your life's been hard, it's been a struggle, but say you'll marry me. Be my wife, and I'll buy us a house in our hometown. You can go to pastry school. We can make this life all our own, together."

"You mean it?" she asks.

"Yes," I say, "I'll go anywhere you want. I'll be the man you need forever, I promise. Just say yes. Say you'll be my wife."

"Oh, Luke," she says, "yes, I'll marry you." She kneels down in the sand next to me and kisses me hard. "Of course I'll marry you," she

gushes. "I love you so damn much." Her hands are on my chest, needy and ready.

"Hey baby," I say with a chuckle, "you better be careful. My cock is ready to go and there's a reception we still have to attend."

She laughs. "Okay," she exhales, "I'll try to contain myself, but God, you make it hard."

We stand, dusting off the sand from our clothes. And I pull her up in my arms again, holding her tight, breathing in her beautiful warmth.

"I love you," I repeat. And I'll keep on repeating it forever. I want her to know that when I say I'll be here forever, I mean for all eternity.

Chapter Nine

LOTTIE

WHEN I WALK BACK UP TO THE BEACH WITH LUKE, HE EXCUSES HIMSELF to go get us some cocktails. I smile as he walks away. And then, I make my way to Avery, because I want to make sure I'm being a good bridesmaid, and giving her the proper attention.

Avery has a huge grin on her face.

"What?" I ask. "Did I miss something?"

"I think *I* missed something," she says. "Lottie, what the heck?"

"What do you mean?" I say. Pressing my lips together. On my ring finger is a giant diamond.

"I saw you kiss my uncle Luke on the beach. I didn't know you guys were hooking up, or like a *thing*."

I laugh. "Well, actually, I think we're more than a thing."

"What do you mean?" Avery asks.

Just then Luke comes over and hands me a glass of champagne. "So, did you tell Avery the good news?"

Avery puts a hand on her hip. "Good news? No, she didn't. I was just trying to get to the bottom of it."

I offer her my hand. She gasps when she sees the engagement ring.

"Oh my God, Lottie, Uncle Luke, you guys are getting married!"

I laugh as Luke wraps an arm around me. "I know today is about you. We didn't want to make a scene, but yes, we're getting married."

"Oh my God," Avery says with pure joy on her face, "Lottie, you are always such a surprise, you're incredible, and I guess my uncle Luke figured that out. You always did walk to the beat of your own drum."

"I was hoping you weren't going to be upset."

"Upset? Nothing could rain on my parade today. You just made it all the better."

I smile, "Okay. Well, that makes me feel good."

"It should. I love you, and I want the best for you. And my uncle Luke, he's a good guy."

I smile, "Yeah," I say, looking up at him, "he's one of the best."

Gabe walks over and takes his wife's hand. "Sorry to interrupt, but I think it's time for the first dance."

Avery takes her husband's hand, "Okay. Well, I'm going to be talking to you two later."

"Of course," I say. "Go dance, have fun, be married."

The happy couple walk away, and I let Luke wrap me in a warm embrace. He kisses the top of my head.

"Well, that went better than you expected, right?" he says.

I sigh, my cheek against his chest. "Yeah," I say, "I guess when someone's happy and in love, they're not going to let anyone else ruin it."

"So," Luke says, "here's my question."

"What?" I ask, pulling back and taking a sip of the champagne.

"I know you're a bridesmaid, so what are your official duties tonight?"

I lift my eyebrows, wiggling them. "Why, did you have something in mind?"

He chuckles, "Oh baby, I have plenty in mind."

Soon enough we're back in his hotel suite, and I let my dress fall to the floor. I've had plenty of champagne and I am feeling the perfect type of tipsy.

"Look at you, wearing nothing but an engagement ring."

I smile, walking toward him. He's sitting on the edge of the bed, still dressed. I wrap my hand around his necktie and tug.

He wraps his arms around my waist, squeezing my bare ass. "Fuck, I love you."

"Good," I say, "because you're kind of stuck with me now."

"So what kind of wedding do you want?" he asks as he begins to rub my breasts together, pressing his mouth to them both, burying his face between them.

"I'm not picky," I say. "Not at all. I'm pretty basic. I like to ride horses. I like to make cakes. I like to..."

Luke chuckles, "Suck my cock."

I laugh. "Oh my God, you're trouble."

"You're in trouble now," he says.

"Yeah, I guess so." I push him down on the bed, and I climb on top of him. "Okay," I say. "Why don't you lick my pussy while we decide what kind of wedding we should have."

"Fuck baby, you have no idea how hot that sounds."

"Yes, actually, I do," I say, with a laugh rolling in my belly.

He undresses quickly, and then buries his mouth between my legs. Sucking me, licking me. "I'm going to make you squirt again," he says. "You ready?"

"Please, don't tease me," I say. "I want you to shove your fingers so deep inside of me, and finger-fuck me until I can't think."

He laughs. "Okay. I guess an engagement makes you a little wild, a little more horny than I imagined."

"Oh, I think you're just bringing out the very best in me," I say as he begins to run his fingers up and down my dripping slit. Fingering me, the way I begged.

I moan in pleasure as he begins to ride his hand against my cunt, making my pussy weep in ecstasy. I grab a pillow and shove it over my face, moaning loudly as I come.

My back arches, and I know I'm squirting. It feels so good, to just be utterly free, absolutely his. When I finish coming, he climbs on top of me, lacing his fingers with mine.

"I'm so fucking hard for you."

"Prove it," I say.

As he enters me, I gasp at his hard rod, as he fills me up. "Oh God," I say. "Can we just elope?"

His eyes meet mine. "What do you mean?"

"Can we get married tomorrow? Find a judge, someone, I don't know, anyone. I want to be yours."

"You mean it?" he asks.

I nod. "Please, I don't want another day to pass without being your wife."

He smiles. "I'll do anything you want, Lottie. I already promised you that."

We kiss then, hard. Knowing that tomorrow, we'll be husband and wife.

Chapter Ten

LUKE

Frankie Love Books and Bio

Frankie Love writes filthy-sweet stories about bad boys and mountain men. Frankie is ridiculously in love with her own bearded hottie, believes in love-at-first-sight, and happily-ever-afters. She also believes in the power of a quickie.

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Calet & Vivien

C.M. STEELE

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Chapter One

VIVIEN

I CAN'T BELIEVE I'M DOING THIS. SHAKING MY HEAD AS I STUFF MY NEW makeup into the cute bag I bought. What have I gotten myself into? I hate this man. Oh no. That's not true. I'm only lying to myself when I say that because I have an insane crush on my project leader, supervisor, mentor, and bane of my existence, Dr. Caleb Carter.

He's the epitome of a brilliant, arrogant asshole. He knows everything about marine biology and always seems to be around when I make a mistake. He let me know I was on thin ice every time. I almost wished he'd let me go, but I've worked so damn hard to get to where I am. Although, the love of it has gone. I love the theory, but the hands-on things aren't as fun. Most sea creatures don't appeal to me as much as sharks and larger sea animals like dolphins, whales, turtles, and coral. The tiny microbes and the creepy bug-like things can stay right where they are. Sometimes it makes me feel bad, but I know that I'm not alone. Still, I managed to earn my way into the project to finalize my degree working with Dr. Carter and his team, only to be put in this position:

His fake girlfriend.

I should report his ass for making a request, but I heard the call with his mother, and I know that she's sick. He wouldn't have asked if it wasn't important, and since I'm his assistant, we can still work on the project material during the downtime leading up to the wedding. Although, I do promise to make this week miserable for him. I still remembered our conversation yesterday. I wanted to kick him in the crotch the way he told me not to flirt with any other men

while we were there, as if I was just going around being a floozy wherever I went.

It's beautiful outside today and perfect for a tiny outfit. Since we're headed to a week in the Keys, I'm going to need the tiniest of outfits, and as a girlfriend, I have to look the part. I'm not a very girly girl, but I asked for some help from Heather, saying I was going on a trip, avoiding any mention that it was with Dr. Carter since she works with us as well. Thankfully she didn't ask too many questions.

I dress as cute as possible while showing as much skin. My hair and makeup appear subtle and friendly. He shoved his credit card in my hand yesterday, telling me to buy several dresses for the parties, so I did just that. I'll look the part of the perfect girlfriend. I look through my curtains and see him leaning on his nice sedan, waiting for me. He runs his hands through his short blond hair, looking handsome as always in a yellow polo that matches perfectly with my outfit. We make a perfect couple. Too bad we hate each other, or rather he hates me. I can't seem to let go of that crush enough to let the hate take over. Still, I'd love to punch him in the nuts just once for good measure.

Gathering my rolling suitcase and my two garment bags, I lock up my apartment and head outside. My eyes meet his, and I watch the doctor's reaction. Suddenly, I'm not sure I can do this when his oceanic blue eyes darken like a sea in the middle of a storm. Lust crosses them, and his tongue comes out and licks his lips briefly before he remembers who he's in front of.

"Let me take that." He grabs my suitcase after popping open the trunk and sliding my green baby inside.

"Do you have everything you need?"

"I hope so."

"Okay. Let's head out then."

"You got my message about matching."

"Actually, I didn't, but it seems we have this thing down pat. Here you go." I firmly press his card against his chest, making sure to splay my palm flat on his broad, muscular frame and linger. "Pale yellow isn't your color, though. Blue would suit your eyes much better. Now come on, Dr. Carter. We can't be late to meet your mother."

"She's not going to be there until the day of the wedding."

Chapter Two

CALEB

THIS IS GOING TO BE A FUCKING NIGHTMARE. I DON'T KNOW HOW MANY times I can beat off before my dick or hand falls off. I feel like the number has to be close. I shoot her a text to let her know that I'm outside waiting for her. It's going to be a long road trip. Two plus hours with her by my side from Miami to the Keys, barring any major backup with traffic. This is going to be a long day.

She steps out of her front stoop, and I'm floored, grateful that I'm leaning on the car door. She's wearing a cute pair of pale yellow shorts with a white-capped sleeve top with daisies on them. Fuck me. She's the picture of innocence that hides a body and voice of pure sin. She starts to roll her suitcase and carries a garment bag over her shoulder.

"Let me take that." I grab her suitcase and pop it into the trunk.

"Do you have everything you need?"

"I hope so."

"Okay. Let's head out then." She slides into the passenger seat before I can hold the door open for her, but I make sure to close it. I have to learn how to act like a real boyfriend or lover. Goodness, this is going to take a lot of skill.

As soon as I get in the driver's seat, I turn to her and say, "You got my message about matching."

"Actually, I didn't, but it seems we have this thing down pat. Here you go." My chest burns as soon as her hand lands on it. I want to hold onto it, keeping her close to me, but she pulls it back with sass, and the card falls into my lap. "Pale yellow isn't your color,

though. Blue would suit your eyes much better. Now come on, Dr. Carter, we can't be late to meet your mother."

"She's not going to be there until the day of the wedding."

"What? You left that little fact. I can wait and drive up there the night before." She opens the car door and steps out.

I jump out as well. "No, you can't. My family is going to be expecting you. If you're not there, she'll learn about it."

"So you couldn't say I had to work?" She challenges, raising those perfectly arched brows. That's new. She went and got them done professionally. They're cute, but I liked the old Vivien just the way she was.

"No. Now, get your ass back in the car."

"You're not my boss on this trip." She crosses her arms under her tits, making them stand out even more. All blood leaves my brain, and I forget all the rules to this fake girlfriend business and just want to bend her over like I've imagined since she first walked into the lab.

"No, I'm your boyfriend, and I'm telling you to get your sexy little ass in the car before I spank it," I warn her, stepping around to the passenger side.

She gasps, those pretty lips parting. "You said that you wouldn't be touching me."

"Only when necessary." I feel like a fucking dirty fucker, but she started it, intentionally touching me like that.

"That doesn't seem necessary." I stand directly behind her as her voice grows weak, breathing shallow.

"Then don't make it necessary," I grunt against her ear.

"Jerk," she huffs.

"Yeah, I love you too, my little mermaid," I huff, holding the door open for her. She gets in and buckles up. Shutting the door again, I quickly run around and get into my seat again.

Once inside, I lock the doors and start the engine, pulling out onto the road while letting out a chuckle. She's going to fucking drive me insane and I let her know it. She giggles; the sound goes straight to my cock, which thankfully is positioned down my leg and not bent up while I drive.

For the first few minutes we enjoy the silence until we hit the highway.

She's the first to speak, and the sound turns me on so damn much. "So, Dr. Carter, tell me more about you. I'm sure your family is going to throw out questions and stuff, especially your mother." Although the mention of my mother definitely calms that lust down.

"First, you should drop the whole Dr. Carter. It's Caleb. Second, I'm twenty-nine, I grew up in Florida and I got my degree when I was twenty-one because I'm hyper-focused and borderline obsessive."

"Borderline," she huffs softly under her breath. It makes me laugh for a change. She gives me a smile that makes me want to touch her, so I reach out and caress her forearm. Immediately she startles and that's not going to work in the least.

"Um...yeah, that's not going to pass for a couple," I inform her.

"Sorry, I was just caught off guard."

"Sorry, I was just testing to see how you'd react." Total fucking lie, but she doesn't need to know that every stolen moment is real for me.

"Always the scientist," she sighs.

"I suppose." Or a man wanting to know if she wants me, too, but it doesn't appear to be the case. Not that I've given her any real reason to like me. I've been an asshole for months on end whether she's earned my ire or not, which on occasion, she surely has jeopardized some of the work we've done. In fact, sometimes it's my growing obsession with her that keeps her on the project instead of letting her go.

"So you haven't told me your cousin's name or the woman he's marrying." Shit, that's a very important detail.

"My cousin Gabriel is marrying Avery. She actually worked for him if you can believe that." I wink at her.

"Strangely, it's such an odd thing." She rolls her eyes and smiles again. This time when I reach out and touch her, she doesn't flinch. I pull back because it's too much and we don't have an audience, so I don't want to give her the wrong impression. As much as I desire her, I have to remember I'm her superior and this could damage both of our careers.

We're halfway there when there's an accident on the road. "Son of a bitch." I call the hotel and let them know that I'm going to be a really late check-in because of the accident. I expected to be there by six, but it looks like we're not going to get there before eight.

We continue to talk about our families, and I learn that Vivien's the only daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Pender, who owns a corn farm.

"So you live in the middle of dry land; why did you want to become a marine biologist? I could see maybe a vet or even a scientist over there."

"I've always wanted to go into the water. It's kind of like living in the desert and someone finally offers you a tall glass of ice-cold water. It's refreshing. When I was a kid, I was teased for looking like Ariel from the little mermaid, but I'd never made it to the sea. So as soon as I got my chance that's where I went to school. I fell more in love with it and now it's my passion. I don't know what I'll do with my degree, but I'll find a place for myself even if it's at the National Mississippi River Museum & Aquarium or the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago which isn't too far from home."

"You're planning to go back home after you get your degree?" I know she's only weeks away from it. The project ends at the end of the summer and she'll have all she needs to get her Master's degree.

"I don't have a real reason to stay." Her phone buzzes and she sends it to voicemail.

"You can take calls, you know?"

"It was a spam call." She's lying to me, but I ignore it. We're almost to the hotel and my chest feels heavy. I need a damn drink.

We finally pull up to the valet at a quarter to eight and our luggage is loaded onto a cart. I head to the front desk and check in. When we get to the elevator, I can see Vivien looking a little panicked. "Oh my goodness. I forgot we're sharing a room."

"It's okay. I'll sleep on the sofa."

"We'll take turns. I'm smaller than you."

"No, that's fine. I'll take the sofa for the week. You're the one doing me a favor."

"I'm like a foot shorter than you. I promise the sofa will be more than big enough for me."

"What kind of gentleman would I be if I kept the big bed?"

"You think you're a gentleman? You've been an ass from the moment I met you. A brilliant, hardworking marine biologist, but a gentleman, I have yet to see, so don't worry about me. The sofa's fine."

"Well, then it will be. Just make sure it's cleaned up before we go. Can't have anyone thinking we sleep apart every night."

"Fine with me. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to hunt down some food. I'm starving."

"We'll go together. First, I'm hungry, and second, just in case I run into any of my family down there, I want to make sure that I can field any questions."

"Give me a minute to freshen up then."

"Good." I send a message to my cousin, letting him know I'm in town.

Hey Gabe, just checked in with my woman at the hotel.

Can't wait to meet her. Your mom is going to lose her mind.

I groan because she is and this is all a fucking lie. It sucks so damn hard because her heart's going to shatter when she learns that I faked the relationship.

"I'm ready." She steps into the room looking as beautiful as earlier if not a little more refreshed. Her long red hair is braided and hanging over her left shoulder.

"That's a great look."

"Thanks. My hair caught too much wind when we had the windows down." She brushes the loose strands from around her face and tucks them behind both her ears.

"Well, let's get going. I know I can eat, and I'd be a terrible boyfriend if I let you starve—fake or otherwise."

"Sounds good to me."

We head down to find dinner and then spend the rest of the night talking about the project. It's easier to focus on work than to delve deeper into how much I want to lean in to kiss her every time she opens her mouth to speak, take a bite or even when she closes it to listen or chew. She's getting more and more under my skin as the weeks have passed and this trip is only just beginning. I don't know how I'm going to make it through without breaking all the rules.

Chapter Three

CALEB

I ADJUST THE CUFFS ON MY SUIT JACKET, BUT I LEAVE THE TIE BECAUSE I don't need that shit tonight. I have on a light blue shirt because Vivien says she thinks it goes with my eyes. Of course, she's not going to be there tonight and I want her to think about it even though I have no intention of wearing this shirt for anyone else. "I'm headed to the bachelor party. You can just chill here," I call out from the bathroom.

"Actually, I've been invited to the bachelorette party," she replies. I step out just in time to see her come out of the closet. My mouth falls open like a fucking cartoon character. She's got a sinful tight and shiny emerald-green club dress. I see red and it's got nothing to do with her hair that's up in a high ponytail that's neat and straightened.

"Invited?" My gaze rakes up and down her body from her fuck-me heels to her gorgeous green eyes. This isn't how everything is supposed to work out.

"Yes, as your girlfriend." She uses air quotes for emphasis. "They thought it was a good idea that I go with them as well. After all, I have to play a part." Yes, I remember that she met them this morning while I was meeting with my cousins.

I move in closer, inches from her, breathing in her scent and growl, "Be careful and remember you're supposed to be mine, so don't be trying to hook up with anyone else." A violent image of me destroying this imaginary prick fills my head.

She presses her finger into my pressed dress shirt, stabbing me with force. "I'm not a whore, you know. I'll be just fine. And by the

way, two can play that game. Remember no fucking the strippers."

The only one I want to fuck is her. I want her to strip for me and I'd love to see her do it right now. I roughly grip her chin with my thumb and forefinger roughly, watching her eyes flair with intensity. "I doubt my cousin will have strippers. He's not that kind of guy and neither am I."

She jerks her face out of my hold. "Well then everyone will still buy the bullshit we'll be selling. Have a great time, dear." She winks and then opens the door, holding it open. "Shall we?"

"Fine." I smile as we make our way to the elevator. The party for the guys is on the top floor, but I'm not going to go up until I see her out.

As we get to the lobby Vivien sees the girls and rushes to their side, pretending to ignore my presence with a bit of attitude. That shit pisses me off more than it should; after all, we're not a real couple.

"Vivien, wait up," I call out, striding toward her.

She turns around as I reach her. "What?" she barely gets the words out as my hand wraps around the back of her head and my mouth lands on hers. I grip the small of her back and drag her firmly to me, deepening our kiss for all to see before quickly pulling back and leaving her stunned. "Remember what I said," I growl out my warning, winking before I turn on my heel.

"Oh my goodness. That was hot. He's jealous as hell. I'm surprised there's not a ring on your finger already," I hear one of the girls say as the sound echoes in the lobby.

"Nah, Caleb is all work." *Not anymore, love. You're all I need.*

I don't speak to anyone as I make my way up to the top floor and the bachelor party. Once the doors open I enter the dark-colored room that's dimly lit, full of men and cigars. Women move around serving food and drink. There are poker tables set up, but all I can think about is Vivien out dancing with men around while I'm at a fucking sausage party. I love my cousins, but I don't want to be here. She's not mine and she doesn't owe me her fidelity. Hell, she doesn't even like me and now I fucked that shit up by kissing her. No. She loved that shit. I had to be the one to pull back. Still, I'm her supervisor and in charge of her while she finishes her degree. It could cost her everything.

"Can I get you something to drink, sir?"

"A vodka whatever." I don't drink, but I could use something to calm my nerves.

"Hey, Caleb, come over here and let me introduce you to my friends. You've met a lot of them already, but you're always busy." Gabe makes introductions, but I won't remember those I don't already know. I don't give a fuck about anything but Vivien right now. My cousin Hunter's looking at me like he knows where my head's at and it's because I'm guessing he's in the same spot as me right now. Both of our moms want us to settle down. I'm ready more now than ever and I'll do whatever I can, but I don't know how.

"It's nice to meet all of you."

"Here you are." I hand the girl a tip. She smiles at me too flirtatiously, but it's none of my business. They're here to make tips. I down the first glass in one fast gulp. It takes a few seconds before the taste hits my tongue and I remember that I hated vodka.

"It's cool. Soon, it'll all taste the same. Get him a mojito," Rhys says, clapping my back while addressing the waitress. He turns back to me and says, "At least this will be a little kinder to you."

"Thanks."

"Maybe you should eat some food and play some poker."

"Sounds like a much better idea." I head over to the table and get into the game as best as I can, but Vivien lives in my head. What was I thinking letting her go in the first place? Letting her go? That's hilarious. Like I have the right to tell her shit, but I'm going to have a say soon. The second she has her degree, I'm going to claim her as mine. I don't give a fuck what it cost me.

An hour into the game, I'm losing money left and right because I can't concentrate on shit but Vivien and the fact that I've drank way more than I should have, so I call it a night.

"Where are you going?"

"Doing what all of you should be doing? I'm going to get my woman before some asshole decides to put his hands on what belongs to me," I snarl.

The elevator ride down to the lobby feels like a damn eternity, but I make it and grab one of the waiting cabs. "Where to, sir?"

"The Wave. Duvall Street."

"Yes, sir."

"I need you to wait for me. I'm just picking up my woman, and we're coming right back here."

"Okay. I can do that."

"Good. I promise it won't be long." I sober up a bit as I consider what's going on in there. If she's dancing with some bastard, I might kill him. He pulls up to the curb, turning off his cab light while he waits for me. I nod and go to the entrance.

The place is crowded when I get inside, but I recognize a couple of the girls, and I know one is the photographer. I need something from her, but I can't remember her name. Damn it. "Hey, I need a favor."

"Yeah, Dr. Carter." Good. She remembers me.

"It's Caleb, actually. Can you get a few pics of Vivien for me at the wedding without her knowing?"

"Sure thing." She goes about drinking with a smile on her face while I go looking for my woman. She points me in the right direction when she sees what I'm doing. "Right there, Caleb."

"Hey, little mermaid, do you want to dance?" I hear the bastard talking to my woman, and he calls her my own personal nickname for her.

"I have a boyfriend. Sorry, I can't," she says like a good girl.

"He should be here watching you if he was your boyfriend, but he must not care for you." She doesn't respond like she's considering his words. I try not to get pissed because we're not a couple and as far as she's aware this is just a favor in exchange to keep her position in the project. A blackmail deal. "See, you know it, don't you? I'll treat you nice and good all night."

That's it. I fucking had enough. "Get the fuck away from her. She's my obsession, and she's my little fucking mermaid. Call her that again and I'll fucking make you chum for the sharks," a growl comes from deep inside of me as I stand behind the asshole about to lose his teeth.

"What are you doing here?" Vivien asks.

"I've had enough of you showing off what's mine. It's time to go back to the hotel." I push past the loser and scoop her up in my arms. She presses her head to my chest. "Damn, I played the jealous boyfriend well, didn't I?"

"Perfectly," she mutters. "Although I could have handled it just fine."

"Yeah, it looked like it."

"Wow, the depth of that sarcasm is deep."

"You've had too much to drink," I inform her as we head outside to the waiting cab. The driver comes out and opens the door for me. I nod at him with a subtle smile.

"Well, it's none of your business, Dr. Carter."

"It's Caleb. Remember that, Vivien," I growl against the shell of her ear, brushing my lips on it.

"We're not around your people." The driver pulls away from the club, and I feel some fucking relief.

"I'm about two seconds from spanking your ass."

"You wouldn't."

"Don't try me." She has the nerve to actually turn in my arms to give me a nice view of her ass while she presses her hands to the seat of the car and I can't pass up the invitation. I run my hand up and down her thigh before I swat her ass cheek through her dress. "Now behave."

We get to the hotel and I carry her up to the room. She's half-asleep in my arms and once we're in the room, I help her take off her shoes and then I change into a pair of pajama pants. My dick throbs painfully when she drops her dress in front of me. She stands in front of me in nothing but a pair of black panties. I grab the undershirt I wore tonight and slip it over her head.

"Tonight we'll share the bed, and I'll be a good boy and keep my hands to myself."

"I'm starting to think you're a dirty boy, Dr. Carter." She reaches out and grabs my stiff cock through my pants. I groan, fighting the urge to let her continue, but I remember that we're both drunk and this isn't how this should happen.

I pull her hand away. "I'm starting to think you want to be punished, and I assure you that one day I'll make you pay for all the bad things you've done, my little mermaid."

I settle her in the bed and lay over the covers. "A few more days and you can go back to your life as normal."

She says something against the pillow that sounds like a muffled "Loved that."

Chapter Four

VIVIEN

I WAKE UP AND I'M ALONE IN BED, GRATEFULLY SO. THE NIGHT BEFORE IS so clear in my head and it can't be forgotten soon enough. Throwing myself at him had been the most foolish thing I could have done. He didn't want me. Everything he did at the club and in the cab had been an act, a bit of a show for his family and friends to lay down the law that he had a woman he loved and everyone could see it. I don't think I can even face him again.

Thankfully he decided to go golfing with the guys because being around him would be my undoing. There's no way I can handle it for the rest of the holiday. In fact, I'll be getting a separate hotel tonight.

For the next two days, he can play it however he wants, but I'll be going to stay at another place as soon as I can.

The clock on the bedside table reads only ten in the morning, so I have time until spa day, but I need to find a hotel to stay at. An hour later, I'm thoroughly pissed and upset. Not a single hotel in the area has room for me. They're all booked for the next few days, but they can get me in next week if I'd like to book it. Who the fuck is like sure I'll go ahead with that offer?

My head is pounding and I finally get out of bed and realize what I'm wearing. I'm just in Caleb's shirt and panties still. I tried to seduce him and he covered me up after he kissed me so violently, threatened to kill a man, and spanked my ass after caressing me where none of his family had been. Fucking asshole.

By the time I make it to the hotel spa, I'm aggravated beyond belief, so I need all the relief I can get. I see the girls, but I can't talk

because some of them witnessed Caleb's faux jealousy and they believe it was real. They're all under the impression that our relationship is true love and I want to cry, so I do my best to ditch them.

With my mud mask on, and cucumber-covered eyes, I lay my head down and enjoy my neck and shoulder massage as my face mask sets. "You are extremely tense," someone that I don't know says.

"I just want to go back home already," I mutter, feeling the frustration wearing on me to the point of breaking.

"Why? You're in paradise." Paradise? Ha!

"Men problems," I answer. I don't know this person, but since it's not anyone associated with the wedding party and his mother doesn't arrive for days, I don't care.

"I'm sorry. Anything you want to vent about? I'm all ears."

"The man I'm with isn't worth my heart and effort. He's not good enough for me, and I'm wasting my time for nothing."

"I say...find yourself a new man."

"Trust me, I will," I sigh.

"Come, Miss Pender. It's time for your manicure." I take off the cold cucumbers when the masseuse leads me to the right area. I wave to the woman whose face is still covered. Sometimes it's nice to vent to a complete stranger.

When I leave the spa, I feel good and decide that I'll spend the rest of the time avoiding Caleb as much as possible since I can't get out of our hotel. The best thing for me to do is hang out with the girls when I can if they're even available.

When I get back to the room Caleb isn't around which is good. He's left me a note saying he's gone out with a couple of the guys on a boat. Of course. I'm glad because that means they won't be back for hours. It gives me time to just relax for the rest of the day.

By the time nightfall comes, I leave for a bit to find dinner. Caleb calls me and asks if I want to have dinner with him and I pass, letting him know that I'm already out and will be back in a bit. I stop at a bar and grill along the beachside. There are plenty of places around this beautiful getaway. We live in Miami, but there's something about this locale that really makes this different. I wish I had someone to spend it with who loved me.

Finally, I make it back to the room and Caleb is there waiting for me with a scowl. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing. You're just roaming around without anyone."

"And? I'm a grown-ass woman."

"It's not safe."

"What the fuck do you care? You were out busy, and you're not really my boyfriend, so please stop. I'm tired and going to bed. Please leave me be." I walk over to the sofa and kick off my sandals and pull out the covers. I'm too damn tired to argue with this man. Boss or otherwise.

He comes to start with me again, but I just give him my back and he walks away. "Stubborn," he mutters as he putters away.

"We're going down to breakfast together. Please get ready."

"Are we having breakfast with anyone?"

"No, but I just got some information from the office and I thought you'd be excited to see it."

"Oh yeah?" I jump off the sofa and lose my footing, hitting the coffee table with my toe.

"Damn it, woman." He catches me and sets me back on the sofa. With gentle hands, he checks my foot, inspecting the damage. "Thankfully, it looks okay. No need to chop it off or anything. I guess it's hard for a mermaid to walk on two feet."

"You got me." I smile. "I'm just so excited about the news. I promise I'm done. Now let's get going." I get up properly this time and walk past him to get my things.

The rest of the day goes better, especially when we look at all the data we received from the sharks whose satellite tags checked in over the last few days. We didn't touch each other again and when we weren't talking about marine science, we kept our distance, but I hope none of the wedding party noticed. We only saw a handful of them throughout the day.

"Only a few days more and I'm home free," I mutter to myself as I make my bed for the night.

"Yes."

"Ah," I scream, jumping out of my skin and sending the pillow flying out of the air. "You scared me half to death. I didn't know you were right behind me."

"I was. I'm glad no one else was up here."

"Well, they shouldn't be anyway. Goodnight, Dr. Carter." I take off my robe and I have my long pajamas on underneath. There's no repeat of the other night because I know where I'm not wanted. I haven't even remotely tried to appeal to him in any way, shape, or form since then. What's worse is he hasn't tried to pull that *I'm the boyfriend* crap, and *you're going to listen to me or I'm going to spank you* crap either. Could a girl be more heartbroken?

Chapter Five

CALEB

"WE NEED TO TALK." IT'S ABOUT TWENTY MINUTES UNTIL WE'RE DUE down for the rehearsal dinner. I'm not looking forward to lying to Vivien when I want to tell the truth, but there's just too much at stake at the moment. After tomorrow night, I'll tell her that I want to spend the rest of my life with her and if she refuses me then I'll just fucking die a miserable old bastard alone on a boat somewhere while she finds someone who never was mean to his mermaid.

"That doesn't sound good. I hope no one has guessed the truth about us." She tilts her head. The truth is that I'm madly in love and that she hates me. No.

"No, but they can sense the tension between us. Look, we need to talk about the other night. I shouldn't have kissed you in the first place and I should have slept on the sofa when you were too drunk. I swear I didn't do anything to touch you improperly. I thought I was trying to look like a boyfriend that cared, but then I got a bit carried away with the act."

"No, it worked. All the girls around thought you were. I'm embarrassed that I dared you to spank me and then stripped in front of you. You're my boss of sorts."

"Don't be. I shouldn't have been drinking in the first place and then coming to add the whole macho attitude. I was dared by some of the other guys who said I didn't give a fuck about you and I had to play the part." That's another lie.

"I understand. Those guys are in love with their women. You know you could have just treated us as dating not in love. It would have made things easier."

I shake my head. I ran into my mother this morning. She hasn't been out much because she's supposed to be resting after her surgery. "No. My mother will be at the rehearsal dinner tonight."

"Oh. Okay. I thought she wasn't coming down until the wedding?" she asks, looking as if this is too much to bear.

"She actually came down a few days early and has been resting while my father and uncle have been having some brother bonding time."

"That's fine. I'll be on my best behavior. I'll act like the loving girlfriend."

"Thanks."

I finish getting ready first because I have to meet the wedding party earlier. "It'll be okay, Vivien. I'll see you down in a little while. Please don't be late." I kiss her cheek and walk out the door. It's only a friendly gesture, but it was a stolen memory that I want etched in my soul for all my days. I miss her mouth on mine. Fuck, I miss that stolen night and the way she tried to give herself to me. Maybe if I was like some of the other guys I would have taken her offer and tossed her ass on the bed, fucked her until we both were a sweaty mess and she had my son growing in her, but I couldn't do it when I knew she'd been drinking.

"Oh son, you made it down here. Where is your lovely woman?" my mother asks suspiciously.

"I have to meet with the wedding party. Vivien will be down here shortly. She's still getting ready. Excuse me." I dodge her questions that I know are coming because I want them to come when we're a united front.

Anxiously, I wait for Vivien's arrival which seems like a lifetime, but in truth it's only fifteen minutes after I left. I meet her at the entrance to the room and take her hand which feels incredible to hold. It's been so long since I touched her in front of others so freely like we're together. Bringing it to my lips, I kiss her knuckles and then turn to kiss her wrist. A slight gasp escapes her parted red lips. "You look stunning tonight, Vivien."

"You look handsome yourself, Caleb." She gives me a smile that hits me deep in the chest and I know that she's playing a part. Fuck, it's killing me because if it was real I'd have her naked and on our bed, spread out while I take her repeatedly.

"Caleb, there you are." Damn it, I love her to pieces, but she's like a vulture and can't wait to strike.

"Mom, I'm so glad you could make it," I grit out even though we'd already seen each other minutes ago.

"And who is this beautiful woman?" she asks, leaving my father in the dust, who's still talking to my uncle.

"Mother, let me introduce you to my girlfriend, Vivien Pender." My mother's face twists for a second before she straightens it. I wonder what the hell that's about, but we're interrupted when dinner's called to start.

"You two are at the same table."

"Good, we have a lot to talk about." She smiles sweetly at Vivien, but I get a sinking feeling that something's wrong, terribly wrong and there's nothing I can do at the moment to handle it.

I take my seat and do my best to focus on the bridal party and the special toasts to Avery and Gabriel, but my eyes keep drifting over to the most important women in my life.

As dinner almost comes to an end, I see them speaking and then the tension grows; before I can react, Vivien takes off out of her seat. I'm out of my chair, needing to find her, but first I need to know what the fuck my mother said.

I take her by her arm and lead my mother off to the patio overlooking the ocean just outside the room. People can see us, so I move a little out of the light. "Mother, what did you say to her?" I bark out, feeling irrationally angry at my mom when I'm to blame for whatever happened, that I'm sure of.

She cups my cheeks with both her hands. "I love you, son, and I want the best for my boy."

"What did you say to her," I grunt, tugging her hands away from my face.

"She's going to leave you, Caleb. I just told her that if she was already one foot out the door, I'd never think she was good enough for my son and that it would be better if she didn't stay for the wedding."

"Fuck, mother." I spear my fingers through my hair, turning in a full circle, trying to figure out how to make it right. "I need to fucking fix this before it's too late."

"Language. It's for the best. I can see how much you're in love with her already."

"Mother, listen. You have no idea what you've just done. Vivien's not really my girlfriend. I asked her to be my fake date to please you, but I'm madly in love with her. For the past few months, I've been an asshole to her when she truly hasn't deserved it because it helps me keep my distance at work. Vivien's one of the grad research assistants working for me and completely off-limits. I want her to marry me and have my babies, but how can I ever get her to see that when I've been the biggest fool in the world. I've got to go and make it right. Shit."

I rush off the deck and head out toward the hotel entrance from the backside. I slide to the elevators, barely stopping without passing them up. I jab the damn button ten times, hoping that it would move faster.

I finally get to our floor and dash to our room. It takes me twice to get it to unlock because I'm too fucking impatient to wait for the green light to come on. "Fucking shit."

Once inside, I see her stuffing her bag. "Stop. Now," I demand.

I cross the distance, closing the space between us. She wipes the tears from her face and my heart tears in two. "Dr. Carter. Please, it's not like it worked out. I'm going to go home and forget this ever happened."

"I can't let that happen, Vivien." I grip her hair which I love and pull her head up to look at me. "I told you to call me Caleb. I swear, woman, you need a fucking spanking and a thorough fucking so you'll remember my name." I slam my mouth on hers, kissing her like I've thought about for days, weeks, months.

She slides her hands around my shoulder and up my neck. My other hand grips her ass, dragging her hips to mine, letting her feel what she does to me. I don't ask, wait, or say anything as I carry her to the bedroom.

Laying over her on the bed, I continue kissing her soft lips, sliding my tongue along hers. Pulling back to get a taste of her neck. "Caleb," she moans.

"That's right, baby. You've got that right. I love hearing my name off your lips."

"What are we doing?"

"What I should have done a long time ago. Make love to you."

I tear off her dress and then work off my clothes, kissing down her body, licking her breasts which are covered by a light blue bra

that's in my way. "That color matches my eyes."

"It's my favorite color."

"I can't decide if mine is red or green," I grunt, gripping her hair hard.

"Fuck, Caleb. Tell me this is real."

"Does this feel real, my little mermaid?" I grind my cock against her mound.

"Yes," she moans so prettily, lips parted as her tongue peeks out just a bit.

I growl at the damn contraption for hindering my view. With a violent yank, I bring it down, freeing her taut and ample tits and sending them bouncing. It's a fucking sexy sight that is now emblazoned in my brain.

"So beautiful." I run my tongue over her nipple, wetting it before sucking it into my mouth. My dick jerks on the sheets, ready to explode. I nearly lose it when her fingers spear through my short hair, nails scratching softly down to my neck.

"Caleb," she moans my name with so much hunger that it only amplifies my need. My hands run up and down her sides, feeling her narrow waist to her perfectly wide hips, ready to have my babies. I growl with lust to breed her and make sure she can't fucking leave me when the wedding is over and the project ends.

I move to the other breast, making sure I don't forget her supple left tit, needing to mark her. Every time she moves her hips, my anticipation becomes unbearable. Rising to my knees, I grab the hem of her panties and pull them down her slender legs. "Fuck, you're so unbelievable. I've longed to touch, to taste, to possess every inch of you, Vivien."

Gripping her ankles, I yank them far apart and then stare down at her core, seeing her bare slit. I set her legs down and settle in between them, gripping my cock firmly as I move toward her entrance.

I don't know if I can eat her out without coming too soon, so I run the tip of my cock, along her seam, watching as it gets drenched with her creaming wetness. "I need you inside of me. Please," she begs.

"Are you ready? Because there's no going back."

"Give it to me." I slide the tip in past her entrance and the sight is nearly my undoing.

"Oh my God. You're so tight." The walls of her core flex around me like a vise and I'm not entirely inside like she's trying to push me out, but I'm a man obsessed. "Relax for me." I drop my head down to hers and kiss the lips that drive me wild. Our tongues meet, sliding along each other as our mouths move and then I roll my hips back and slam forward.

I catch her cry in my throat and own it. I know the truth of the situation, but I can't muster the shame of taking it slower. She's mine and only mine. That shit has me mentally banging on my chest like a fucking beast. I fist her beautiful red hair, causing her pain to distract her from the ache between her legs. "I'm sorry, love. I didn't know and I don't know if there's any way to soften that blow, but it's almost over. The pain will pass and then I'm going to make you cream on my cock. Do you understand me, Vivien?"

"Yes. Caleb." She gasps. "Is this normal?"

"I don't know. I've never done this before," I grunt.

"What? You've never been with a virgin?"

"No. I've never been with anyone."

"Bullshit."

"You've known me for months. Do I come off as the personable type? Do I make time for anyone if it doesn't have to do with work?"

"I suppose you have a point."

"Look, I'm a damn nerd. I love what I do and I might have been a super geek to the point that I couldn't get a girlfriend or maybe because I never tried. I saw you and all of a sudden, I felt things I've never felt before. Like my career, my love for marine biology no longer took first place anymore. I was fucking angry, scared, and I was a dick to you because of it. For that, I'm truly sorry, and I'm sorry that I stayed away when all I wanted to do was keep you with me and forget everything else but you and I."

"Dr. Carter, I believe what you're saying is you're a bit obsessed with me."

"A bit doesn't belong in that sentence. Completely, wholly, insanely obsessed is more like it."

"I feel the same, but that doesn't change that you're too big for me."

"Thanks, but it's because it's the first time I stretched that tight little cunt out. Soon we'll be fucking all the time and you'll be able to take my dick when I give it to you with ease. I'm going to move, and

you let me know if it's too much." I slide out and she flinches but doesn't say a word, so I push back in and she doesn't flex as much. A few more times and her face relaxes.

"Is that better?"

"Yes, a lot better. Oh." I bent down and sucked on her throat. "You're mine, Vivien. I'm done holding back. I've pushed you away for the last time."

"Good. I don't want you to hold back. Take me, Caleb." I lift her legs over my shoulders and drive into her pussy fucking until we're both crying out. I shoot my seed deep inside her, hoping it's staying put until our baby forms. If not, I'll keep trying.

Setting her legs down, I pull out and she groans from the pain. That's when I see the bloody pink mix we made on the sheets. "Oops. I'll be right back."

I rush into the bathroom and do a quick search. Finding what I need, I turn on the tub. I want Vivien to soak and ease that sore slit that has got to be fucking aching. Watching the massive bubbles fill the basin, my face breaks out into a grin. I love this hotel. Vivien sits up in the bed when she sees me slide out of the bathroom like a nut, completely ass naked.

"Come on, my dear." I extend my hand and wait for her to take it.

"What's going on?" she asks, taking my hand with a bit of excitement.

As I lead her into the bathroom, I answer, "You need to ease those sore muscles."

She turns around in my arms, pressing her palms on my chest with her manicured nails looking pretty. "Will you join me?"

"If you want me there, I'm all in."

"I think you were all in a few minutes ago."

"If you only think, I must have not been doing it right."

"Oh, you were doing it right." She looks straight at my cock, shooting lust straight through my spine.

"Thanks." This woman will make me fuck her again when I shouldn't be inside her tight hole. My dick's already standing at attention as I help her into the water.

"Wow, he's ready to go again."

"Can you blame me? I have the most beautiful woman in my arms, naked, and we've shared something special. All I can think

about is doing it again.”

I help her inside the tub and then climb in behind her. We rest with her back to my chest, soaking in the hot bubbles. “I could get used to this.”

“Good, I plan to keep us like this.”

“But what happens when we get back? You know it’s against the school’s policy.”

“Let me worry about that. I promise I won’t let anything happen to you. I’d give up my career before I’d ruin your chances.”

“Oh, Caleb.” She spins around in the water, sloshing it out of the tub as she straddles my hips. My thick ridge lines up with her itty-bitty hole, and she slowly sinks down until she’s entirely seated on my cock.

“Bad girl, you’re going to be sore.”

“A bit late for that, Dr. Carter. Now, are you going to complain or enjoy it?”

“I’ll take the latter.” I cup her ass and hold on as she bounces up and down my length, riding me until the water’s cold and half out of the tub.

Chapter Six

VIVIEN

"YOU LOOK WONDERFUL," I BLURT OUT WHEN CALEB STEPS INTO THE bathroom as I finish up my makeup. He's in his nice blue suit that goes perfect with his eyes, looking too sexy to be walking down the aisle with anyone else. I'm a little bit jealous. Granted, it's probably about twenty steps or so and it'll be over before I know it, but it's not the point. A girl can't help herself when she just finally got the man of her dreams after all this time.

"And you look insanely stunning. There are no words for how beautiful you are, Vivien," Caleb states, staring at me with such conviction in his blue eyes that I don't doubt a word he's saying. "An absolute goddess."

"Thank you." Since all the bridesmaids are going to be in beachy pink, I opted for a pale blue chiffon dress with thin straps and some nice heavy silver costume jewelry to accent it with some matching strappy sandals. My long red hair is braided and rolled into a round bun with loose, curled strands framing my face.

"I hate that I have to leave you even for just a short time."

"It's fine. We'll see each other soon. After all, I'll be down and watching."

"You promise?" Does he really believe I won't be there?

"Of course. There's nowhere else I'd rather be than with you, Caleb. Now go on before Gabe chicken's out." I try to shoo him out of the bathroom with my hands on his back, pushing him, but he doesn't budge.

"Yeah, like that shit would ever happen." Caleb laughs and turns for a kiss before he leaves the bathroom.

I step out to the bathroom door frame and say, "You've got a point. The man is obsessed when it comes to her."

He takes his room key, phone, and wallet, tucking them into his pockets before heading toward the door. He's just about there when he turns back. "I need another kiss."

"Okay. This is the last one because I'll have to reapply it the way you're at it."

"Isn't it an all-day kind of lipstick?" he asks, having picked it up earlier to check it out while I was getting ready. He's a bit curious about all my things. Honestly, he hasn't left my side much this morning as if he's afraid I'll cut and run.

After everything, I suppose maybe I should, but he has no idea that my feelings are the same as his. I didn't have some major declaration to share because I couldn't just say it, but I surrendered my innocence, put my future in his hands, and I think that should say it all.

"Not with your efforts," I answer, tapping my hand on his cheek.

"Touché, my dear. Touché." He brings my palm to his lips and kisses it.

"You need to be leaving. The wedding starts soon and you have to meet the groomsmen."

"You aren't going to leave, are you?"

"I knew it. No, Caleb. I'll be waiting. Besides, I'd have to find a cab or something to get me all the way back to the mainland and that's a lot of hassle. If I was going to ditch you, I'd at least wait until we returned to Miami."

"That's going to get your ass tied to my bed when we get home." He grabs my wrists and locks them behind my back as he pins me with his body against the bathroom sink. "Vivien," Caleb sighs, voice cracking as his nose presses against my throat. "I can't let you go. I need you."

I feel his length against my pussy and I know he's talking about more than sex, but he's hitting my greedy, newly experienced bits at the right angle and I want more. "I need you too," I moan, rolling my head back, giving him more access to my neck. He lifts me onto the granite vanity, shoving my dress up. Quickly he frees his cock from his dress pants and lines his cock with my hole, pushing my panties to the side and then he roughly slams home.

"Is this what you need?" he asks, rocking into me, fucking me deep as he holds my wrists behind my back.

"Yes, Caleb. Don't stop."

"I'm not. You're mine. I'm never letting you go. Do you understand that? You're my obsession, my adoration. I live for you. I love you, Vivien."

"I love you too, Caleb," I cry out. My orgasm hits me hard. My legs flex and I squeeze them around his waist as my body trembles. He pumps quicker, and with a roar, he fills me with his seed. We haven't spoken about protection, but we're both biologists. There's no doubt we're taking a big risk of putting a baby inside of me.

He stays like that for a moment and then pulls out and adjusts my panties, patting them in place. "Need to keep my seed where it belongs. And yes, I'm trying to put a son inside of you. Even our own little mermaid will be perfect as well."

He fixes his dress shirt and zippers up his pants before he washes his hands. I sit on the countertop silently because I don't know how to respond to the fact that he wants the same thing. I'm about to speak, but I'm interrupted by someone knocking on our hotel room door. "See, I told you you're running behind. They're going to drag you out by your ear."

"Making you scream my name is worth it." He kisses me hard before pulling back to answer the continuous pounding.

"I'm coming. Hold your horses."

I hop off the sink and wash my hands and try to make myself look presentable just in case the person comes into the room.

A minute later, Caleb comes into the bathroom. "Love, I have to go down now, but my mom's here and she wants to apologize for yesterday."

"Apologize?"

"Yes. Just listen and please don't run. I told her to behave. You are the two most important women in my whole world."

"Don't worry about us. Go on. I'm sure we'll be fine."

He kisses me once more and I can feel the fear in his goodbye, but I won't let her push us apart. I step out into the little sitting room, and she's got a look of contrition on her face that takes me by surprise.

"Vivien, please have a seat." I do, because frankly I need it. Caleb made my legs a little weak. "First, I wanted to apologize for my

behavior yesterday. It was wrong and not like myself. I should have handled myself better, but after hearing you mention finding a replacement for my son at the spa, I freaked out."

"Oh my goodness. I didn't think...."

"Yes, that you were talking to anyone in the family. I learned from Caleb that it was all his stupid idea to make you his fake girlfriend."

"I only heard about the wedding when he was on the phone with you and he mentioned having a girlfriend to bring. Honestly, when he asked me to do this, I thought I was getting tossed off the project."

"Yes. He told me he's been a real piece of work when it comes to you. I'm surprised you even gave him the time of day."

"It's hard to admit that you love someone who's an asshole to you, but knowing why he was a jerk made it easier. Also there were moments when I really did earn his ire. Ruining things on the project because I was nervous in his presence."

"Still, I was wrong to say you don't belong here. It's clear you both care for each other. I just don't want to see my son hurt."

"You won't. I love him and now he knows it. Hopefully, the school doesn't give him a hard time about us. I hate for him to lose any project because of me."

"He'd give it all up for you."

"That doesn't mean he should have to. It's not like he's given me any special treatment. Everyone in the office knows that I'm the one person he's been the most critical of and the one he's nearly let go more times than anyone can count."

Chapter Seven

CALEB

THE WEDDING GOES OFF WITHOUT A HITCH OR RATHER I SUPPOSE IT DOES because the couple gets hitched, but it's neither here nor there because I'm one lucky man. The entire time my eyes were focused on Vivien who did her best to watch the happy couple while on occasion silently scolding me for not paying attention to my cousin Gabe and new cousin Avery. They are a lovely couple and I wish them all the best. I owe them a world of gratitude for bringing the chance to snare Vivien into my net. A week to win her heart even though I wasn't going about it the right way.

"Son, you're supposed to talk to her, not stare at her all night."

"I'm getting us some drinks, Dad," I explain, but honestly, the line is too long to wait for them and I want a level head because I plan to make it a long passionate night before we have to leave.

"She's a great girl. So when's the wedding?"

"I don't know. I suppose I'd have to ask her to marry me first. Although given our work and school situation, I don't know if she'll forgive me if things go south."

"I'm sure she will. That girl has hearts in her eyes and if you're smart a baby in her belly. That's how I got your mother."

"Hey, I don't want to hear that."

"It's the truth though."

"Well, I'm definitely working on keeping her close to me for the rest of our lives and I'll be asking her as soon as I pick out the best ring."

"What are you boys over here talking about?"

"Dad's telling me to use protection so I don't have kids until I'm thirty-five."

"What?" she screeches, drawing attention to her.

I chuckle and walk away. I'm sure my father will pay me back for that later. Now it's time for me to find the love of my life and remind her that she picked the best Carter in this place. "Why hello Miss Pender. May I have this dance?"

"Yes, Dr. Carter. I believe my card isn't full just yet." She twists her lips up in a crooked smile.

I narrow my eyes and grab the place setting on the table as if it's her imaginary dance card and scan it back and forth with my eyes. "Well, it better be full with my name only."

"Jealous much?" she giggles.

"Possessive." I pull her up into my arms, holding her body tightly against mine.

"That's not a very good trait." I hear her admonishment and toss it back at her.

I squeeze her ass. "Who was glaring at the bridesmaid as I walked down the aisle earlier?"

"I said it wasn't a good trait. It doesn't mean I don't have it too." With a giggle, she takes my hand and leads me out onto the dance floor. I toss the wedding announcement on the table and follow my love.

"We leave in the morning and we're due back in the lab on Tuesday at nine. Are you prepared?"

"Not at all. Maybe we should keep this a secret until I finish the project."

"Vivien, that's another month from now."

"Yes, but it's probably for the best."

"I don't think it's for the best."

"Your degree isn't on the line."

"No, just my job and reputation."

"Then maybe we should just end things now." She pulls back and well fuck if I'm letting that happen.

"No. Hell no. Not happening. No fucking way in hell." I scoop her up in my arms, toss her over my shoulder and march right across the sand and to the hotel. "We are going to make this work and we're going to start right now."

"Start right now?"

"Well, first I need to remind you what telling me you're leaving does to me and then we're packing our shit and heading home."

"Everything okay, Dr. Carter?" the hotel manager asks.

"Yes, Mr. Brant. A wedding just getting us ready for our own," I growl, swatting her ass in front of him as he makes his way back to the reception.

"Let me get the door for you then." He smiles and holds it open. "Have a good night."

"I'm sure we will," Vivian says, laughing as she waves at him through the closing door.

"You can put me down now."

"Not a fat chance in hell." We ride the elevator up and I get her to our room within a few minutes. The second we fall onto the mattress we're naked, bodies grinding until she's screaming my name and I'm unloading my seed in her womb.

"We're going to talk to Dr. Shales when we get back," Vivien says, snuggling into my arms.

Chapter Eight

VIVIEN

"SIR, MISS PENDER AND I NEED TO SPEAK WITH YOU."

"Please do take a seat." We do and he gives us both an appraised look. I'm nervous for both of us because I've worked hard and although I'm at the tail end of the project, I'm not afraid to lose it. I'd hate for him to damage Caleb's career.

"Over the past week, Vivien and I attended a wedding and I have admitted my feelings for her. We will be getting married soon."

"About damn time," he blurts out, slapping his hands on his desk.

"Excuse me?"

"We've all been taking bets on how long it would take for you to crack."

"I don't understand. You knew?"

"Vivien is one of the brightest, most talented biologists to ever come through here. I've had her in many of my classes over the years and never has she had so many mishaps, mistakes, and complaints until now. In fact, she never has. After one day of observation, the problem was clear. The tension between you two was so damn combustible we thought the entire complex could explode with just the right spark. It was only a matter of time, although I'm glad that you two decided to at least wait until you were out of the building to explore your relationship. It wouldn't be too safe if you went and let your animal instincts loose in a lab. Anyway, I wish you both the best."

"Does this mean we're not in trouble?"

"There are no rules being broken. Even though you're technically her superior on this project, I'm her instructor and the one giving her the final approval for her degree. Since she's done an exemplary job given the situation, I'd say she's already passed and will receive her diploma. Although I'm sure now that initial conflict has ebbed, I'm betting we see the biologist I expected when I brought her in. Am I correct, Miss Pender?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's good. Now, if you two will excuse me. I have a meeting with the Dean." We both stand up and walk out of the office and see the entire crew standing there with a big about time banner and confetti cannons going off as cheers erupt.

Caleb waves his hand down at them to silence their cheers. Once they've all settled, he says, "Thank you. Apparently, everyone was aware of our feelings before we were. You could have told me sooner, damn it. Anyway, thank you. Now get back to work. We have a lot to catch up on, and I want to see what you've been doing in my absence."

They all laugh and we walk down the steps to meet the happy yet dispersing crowd. It feels good for him to press his hand to the small of my back in front of everyone.

"We've received data from over twelve different species this week."

Chapter Nine

CALEB

"CALEB, THIS CAME FOR YOU," VIVIEN SAYS, WALKING IN WITH A package.

"Oh, good. Let me have it?"

"Wait...it's from Rylee? Like Rylee the bridesmaid, Rylee?"
There's that possessive side I love from my girl.

"Yes. She and her assistant were photographing the wedding—if you remember," I tap her nose and then tear open the envelope in front of her.

Reading the note aloud: *Caleb, I hope these are exactly what you are looking for.*

I pull them out for her and sit down on the sofa, pulling her down by my side. We flip through the small book. The first picture is of our kiss in the lobby. "I didn't know she managed to get this one. I hadn't asked her for the favor yet."

"What do you mean?"

"The night at the club, I asked Rylee if she could get a lot of shots of you for me personally."

"You did?"

"Vivien, I love you. I knew it then and I was afraid that we wouldn't have a life together so I hoped to have some memories."

"Oh my goodness, that's so sweet, Caleb. I love you too and these are perfect." She throws her arms around me and kisses me hard. Laughing happily, I pull her close and kiss her back. Once we break apart, she focuses on the pictures, scrolling through them, page by page, full of images of her in perfect innocent expressions. I love the

ones of us dancing together at the reception like we're in our own little world.

"Rylee and her assistant did an amazing job."

"They most certainly did."

"Are you still jealous?"

"It's possessive, and the answer is no." She sticks her tongue out at me before turning her attention back to the photos. While she's busy admiring them, I drop down on one knee and finish off the surprise with the other one I've been waiting to give her.

"Vivien, I've loved you before I knew how to come to terms with it. I'm obsessed with you to the point of madness, and I need you in my life for the rest of my days. Will you do me the honor of marrying me?"

"My mother always wanted me to marry a doctor."

"I like your mother already."

"I didn't say yes."

"Too bad. I wasn't really taking no as an answer anyway." I slide the diamond ring on her finger and bring us both to our feet as I kiss her nice and slow. "Marry me."

"Yes," she answers between kisses.

"Soon," I reply.

"Yes."

"Tomorrow?" I'll take what I can get as I scoop her up and carry her to our bedroom.

"Maybe."

"I guess you'll need some convincing."

"You could try."

"I'll never stop trying to get between your legs, my little mermaid," I growl, enjoying our love over and over.

C.M. Steele Books and Bio

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Epilogue

AVERY

THE PAST WEEK HAD BEEN A WHIRLWIND OF ACTIVITY, AND I WOULDN'T have had it any other way. My dream wedding in the Florida Keys with all of our family and friends didn't just go off without a hitch... it led to love for so many people.

As I sipped champagne on the plane with my new husband seated next to me, I could barely wait to reach our honeymoon destination. Although the odds of all of our bridesmaids and groomsmen finding love during our destination wedding had been slim, I'd somehow won our little bet. And I was looking forward to Gabe paying up.

Instead of using the plane's WiFi to stream a movie, I was currently scouring the internet for all of my options. My lips curved into a smile of pure feminine satisfaction as I scrolled through different sexual positions, trying to decide which one I'd pick.

As though he could read my mind, Gabe leaned close and asked, "What are you looking at?"

"I'm picking out my prize."

"Prize?" he echoed, his brows drawing together.

"For our little bet." I turned toward him with a smug grin. "The one you were so certain you'd win."

His head reared back, his eyes widening. "There's no way everyone found love at our wedding."

"Oh, ye of little faith." I lifted a finger to start counting them all off. "Austin took full advantage of finangling his way into an invitation to our wedding to come for Ruby and now she's moving onto his ranch."

He heaved a deep sigh. "And Lennox is already whisking Brielle to Vegas for a quickie wedding."

"Which I'm sure he'll make certain is gorgeous and memorable." I lifted two more fingers. "Then there's Emma and Rhys, who've already gone ring shopping."

"And Hunter turned his fake relationship into a real one when he proposed to Skylar on the beach," he groaned.

"Yup." I let the P on the end pop, widening my fingers on one hand so all five were up. "And I already knew that Rylee and Jace were going to end up together. They just needed to meet in person, and our wedding was the perfect opportunity for all of Rylee's dreams about her military pen pal to come true."

"Okay, but what about Miles?"

"He fell for Sadie hook, line, and sinker." I did a little dance in my seat as I lifted my other hand to tick off another couple. "She's going to work on the Read First program for the Dragons. That job couldn't be more perfect for Sadie if it'd been created just for her."

"Yeah, it is," he agreed with a nod.

"And they are perfect together," I added with a smug grin, making Gabe laugh.

"And Lottie—who's always had a crush on my uncle, by the way—made Uncle Luke's trek from his cabin in the mountains more than worth it." Wiggling my ring finger, I giggled. "Did you see the size of the diamond he put on her finger?"

Sliding his arm behind my back, Gabe pulled me against his side and growled, "Are you angling for a bigger ring as your prize?"

"Definitely not." I shook my head. "I love the ring you gave me, and I plan on being quite satisfied with what you're going to give me for winning the bet."

"That's only seven out of eight. What about Caleb?"

Lifting my eighth finger, I replied, "He's planning to turn his fake girlfriend into his real wife."

Gabe laughed and planted a kiss on my smiling lips. "I guess you were right," he conceded with a shrug. "Cupid definitely got his invitation to our wedding."